

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE 1978

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HEADLINE FOR MURDER

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE FULL COUNT

by JOE R. LANSDALE

OLD LAUGHTER

by MOSS TADRACK

CRITO
DWIGHT
SWAIN

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THERE'S A
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE, 1978
VOL. 42, NO. 6

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DEADLINE FOR MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

A fortune in gold has been hidden somewhere in the old hotel. But no one has found it and now the hotel is about to be torn down. At this point an heiress to the missing fortune calls in Mike Shayne to locate her share — and thereby detonates a powder train of murder 2 to 40

A FINE HARD-BITTEN NOVELET

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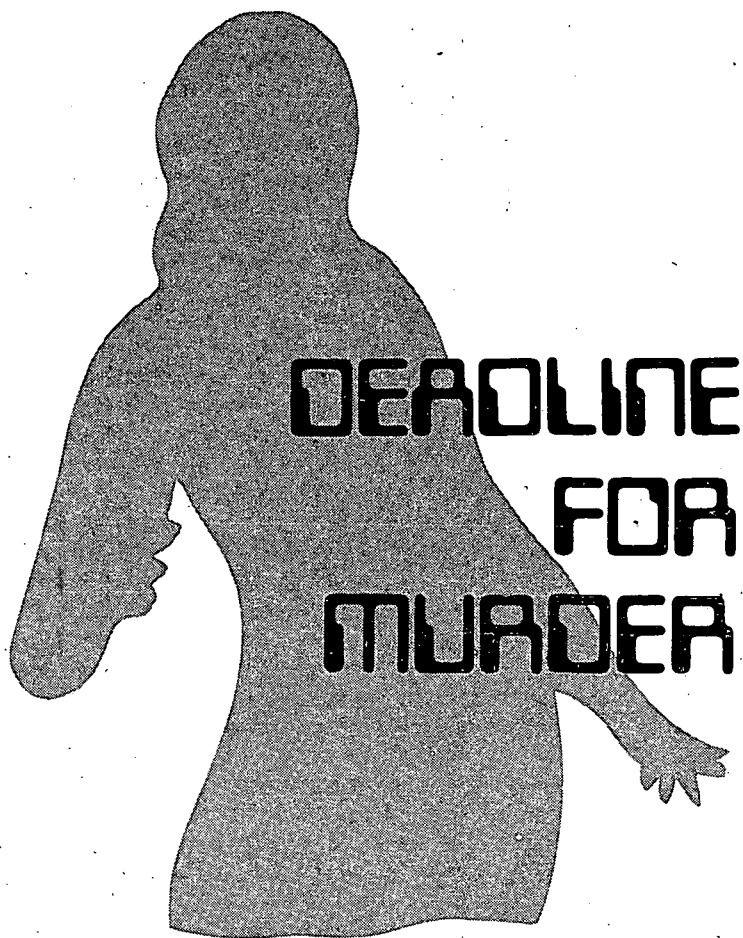
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DEADLINE FOR MURDER

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

Everyone knew Old Man Jeffers had hidden a fortune in gold somewhere in the old Miami hotel. But nobody ever found it-- until the abandoned hulk was due to be torn down and the heirs turned to Mike Shayne for help before family feuds threatened to spark murder.

THE GIRL WAS RUNNING hard so that her sandals slap-slapped on the cold concrete walk. She was panting and sucking in mouthfuls of air.

Mike Shayne could hear her coming toward him. It was late at night and otherwise quiet in the weird jungle of steel and concrete under the expressways that had replaced what was once the heart of the city of Miami.

He could hear her coming, but he couldn't see her until she was almost on top of him.

For blocks in every direction, the stores, rooming houses and hotels which Shayne had known so well had been razed and the area where they had stood replaced by parking lots and roofed by the twisting, swooping underside of the concrete speedways.

This late at night the sparse traffic whispered by overhead, but the big reheaded detective might as well have been at the bottom of the sea as far as those drivers were concerned. He and they were in two different worlds.

What was Miami's most famous private investigator doing, late at night and alone, in this steel and concrete jungle? Instead of taking a taxi to his residential hotel apartment on Second Street, he had elected to walk home from the all-night garage.

He and Lucy Hamilton, his long-time more-than-secretary, had enjoyed a rare evening out at one of the newest of the supper clubs

across Biscayne Bay in Miami Beach. Exactly what had happened to his special Buick in the sub-basement parking lot beneath the cafe, he knew he would never find out from the attendants.

But the return trip had been rendered nerve-wracking by the flicker and fade of his headlights, indicating some damage to the complex wiring beneath the hood. After returning Lucy to her apartment, he had driven the vehicle to the all-night garage close to his home and left it there for a wiring overhaul.

Then, spurning a taxi, he had taken the familiar back-alley shortcut to his home. Only now it was no longer familiar. Temporarily lost, he had paused to regain his bearings in the sub-expressway complex of pillars and girders when the slap-slap of the running footsteps first sounded.

He stood with his back to a concrete abutment and waited.

The girl whipped round a corner of the heavy concrete abutment all but on top of the detective. The garish sodium "high crime area" lights which had replaced the weaker bulbs and soft moonlight of the Miami that Mike Shayne remembered shone some rancid rays even here, and by this faint light he saw her...and the knife in her hand.

Shayne reacted with a speed and surety born of long years in his dangerous profession.

She was trying to slow and

swerve at the same time, and that made her off balance and vulnerable. The redhead took full advantage of the opportunity. His left hand grabbed her right wrist and immobilized the knife. His right hand and arm pulled her to him and held her quite helpless.

"Hold on," he said quietly. "I'm not a mugger. I mean you no harm. Just put that knife away, and I'll let you go."

Her face was close to his, her eyes full of rage and hatred and fear. For a moment he was doubtful of what she might do.

"I can twist it out of your hand," he said. "I can break your arm if I have to. But I'd rather not."

Suddenly her eyes cleared and her whole expression changed. "I'll bet you could at that, Uncle Mike," she said. "Okay, I'll be a good girl if you let me go."

Mike Shayne didn't let go immediately, but gave her a closer look and searched his memory for the tones of her voice.

She was young — twenty-two or three at the most — and slender, with black hair in a short wedge cut and flashing black eyes. Properly dressed and made up, she might have been beautiful, but she wore only a black tee-shirt, tight slacks and sandals.

It was the look in her eye, plus the odd crinkle at their corners that triggered a year old memory.

"Wendy Jeffers!" the redhead said. She nodded.

Then the three men who had been after her came in sight, saw Mike Shayne, spread out and stopped a few feet away. They were big and roughly dressed, and two of them wore the hard hats of construction workers. As far as he knew Mike Shayne had never seen them before, but apparently the one in the middle — the one carrying a short length of two-by-four timber — knew who the detective was.

"Sorry, Mr. Shayne," the man said, "but this girl has ripped off something that belongs to us. We don't want trouble with you, but we've got to have it back."

"Did you?" Mike Shayne asked the girl, but without taking his eyes off the men.

"I sure as hell didn't", she said in his ear. "It's they who are the thieves."

Mike Shayne lifted a heavy eyebrow.

"Hell, Mister Shayne," the man said. "We want that broad. We got orders to bring her in. She stole something."

"In that case," Mike Shayne said, "let's all go find a cop. There's bound to be one just a couple of blocks over on Flagler."

He knew perfectly well nobody wanted that.

"Give me a couple of minutes start," Wendy whispered in his ear. "That's all I need, Uncle Mike."

"You don't even need that," the detective said. "Just keep

behind me — and don't use that knife."

He could see that the three men were bracing themselves to rush him, so he did the one thing they wouldn't be ready for.

He rushed them instead.

The leader was obviously the man with the two-by-four, so the redhead took him out of action first. He hit the stubbled jaw with a long looping, overhand right. That was all that was needed.

The tough was out on his feet, but he fell to his right and obstructed the man to Shayne's left.

That left the redhead free to deal with the one on his right. He kicked the man's shins almost hard enough to break the bone. Then Shayne clouted him when he doubled over in agony. That took care of number two.

The third man didn't stand to fight but turned and bolted toward the river.

As soon as Wendy Jeffers saw the fight was over, she turned and bolted, too.

She didn't get far. Mike Shayne ran her down with ease. As soon as she felt his big hand on her shoulder, she stopped running. The knife had vanished into a leg holster under the slacks below her knee.

For a moment both of them stood panting.

Shayne recovered first. "Okay, Wendy," he said. "Suppose you tell me what this is all about. Who

are they — and what were they after?"

"They work for my cousin Rod," Wendy panted. "At least I think they do. As to what they were after... you've heard of the treasure map. That's what they thought I had. I don't have it, though. If I did, I'd be long gone from this lousy town, and the treasure with me. You'd think even an idiot like Rod could figure that out and not waste time sending those goons after me."

"Treasure map?" Shayne asked. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"Oh Jesus," she said, "Grandfather Jeffers' treasure. You're an old-timer. You've got to remember. The treasure of the Little Princess."

Mike Shayne thought for a minute. He half-remembered hearing some sort of story of a treasure a long way back. He said, "I think we'd better go back to my place till it's safe for you to be on the streets again. You can fill me in on what it's all about."

"Oh, no," she said, trying to pull away from his grip on her arm. "I'm safe enough now you put those bastards out of the picture. Thanks for helping — but I'm back on my own now."

"Not a chance," Shayne said. "It's still only two in the morning, and there could be more where those lads came from. It's only a three-minute walk to my place and I'll fix us some early breakfast

while you tell me about the treasure. Your mother and dad were friends of mine, God rest their souls, and I wouldn't think of letting any harm come to you in the dark of this night."

She didn't protest — largely because she could obviously see that the big man's mind was made up and that protest would do her no good.

This acceptance Mike Shayne noted and liked about her. He led the way back to the still built-up blocks between Flagler Street and the river. Even here there were empty spaces where the familiar stores, apartments and hotels had come down and new structures were being erected. In the last five years there had been so many changes that even the private detective, who had once known every store front and doorway, had to watch where he was walking.

They crossed the Miami Avenue bridge and, in a few minutes, were at Shayne's apartment hotel. The desk clerk scarcely glanced up when he heard the redhead's familiar tread on the carpeted lobby.

Once inside the detective's comfortable apartment, he fixed them each a shot of Martell with a water chaser. Wendy tossed down the fiery liquid straight, like a man. Shayne took his more slowly and set about fixing them each a plate of ham and eggs and thick slices of hot buttered toast. The coffee that went with it was

brewed hot and strong.

"Now," he said as they ate, "you tell me why those three thugs thought you have a map to old Granddad Jeffers' treasure. It is the gold the old man's supposed to have buried someplace inside the Princess Hotel, isn't it?"

"That's right." Wendy spoke through a mouthful of toast. "You know the story of how it got there, don't you?"

By now Mike Shayne had sorted out his memories of one of Miami's more famous and tenacious legends.

II

OLD TOM JEFFERS had been a Miami pioneer. In fact, his family had lived along Biscayne Bay long before Flagler brought the railroad down and made the city possible. They had fished and trapped for a living. Legend had it they were members of the last gang of wreckers and semi-pirates along the Florida coast.

Certainly, old Tom grew up knowing every reef and sandbar and hidden cove for a hundred miles around. In the turbulent Twenties he had put that knowledge to good use, running in cargoes of liquor from the Bahama ports and the mother ships that rode the Gulf Stream off shore.

Beginning with one fast boat, he wound up with a flotilla. His

profits in cash were known to be tremendous.

When rum-running grew too dangerous and the competition too heavy, Jeffers had used his new fortune to go into the contracting business. Many of the hotels and business buildings in the newly burgeoning city of Miami and on the South Beach across the Bay were the work of his firm.

His last and favorite building was the Princess Hotel in downtown Miami. It was certainly his most famous. The Princess he built for his own account, and intended to spend his old age in the luxury penthouse which topped it off ten floors above the teeming streets.

Because of this, he spared no expense to make it one of the most luxurious resorts on the Gold Coast. In its day it was just that, with imported marble and rare woods, velvet drapes, and hanging light shades by Louis Comfort Tiffany himself.

In the open courtyard within the lobby was a long, rectangular fish pond, stocked with rare tropical fish and fed by a clear stream of water. The fountain from which the water came was the figure of a fairy-tale princess. Her regal gown and tiara aflash with imitation jewels.

In her arms she cradled a vase from which a stream of water poured into the pool. At night the princess was illuminated by colored spotlights. The effect was

a theatrical wonder to behold. This was the famous "Little Princess" of Miami and it was known wherever the Beautiful People of that day gathered about the world.

No one really knew how or when the other legend began — the legend of the old pirate's gold. By the time old Tom Jeffers moved into his penthouse, it was already common street talk in the city.

Old Tom, so the story went, trusted neither banks nor any other financial institutions, neither stock nor bond. In an older time he would have buried a pot of money under a cabin or out in the swampy jungle. In his old age he did what, to him, seemed wiser. The story ran that he "put his money in the Princess." That is, he converted the bulk of his fortune into gold (nobody was sure whether bullion or coin) and literally built it into his new hotel.

The trouble was, nobody knew where or how. It might be cached inside the walls or under the floors. There might be a secret room. Nobody knew for sure but old Tom Jeffers himself.

That was the way it stood when Tom Jeffers died. In the middle of a party, he put his drink down on the bar in the penthouse apartment he kept on the top floor of the Princess. Then his head followed his glass to the slick mahogany and he was dead of heart failure.

It was quick and almost painless. It was exactly the way the old pirate would have liked to die.

Unfortunately for his three sons, he left no clue at all as to where the mysterious treasure might be hid. Not even a shadow of a clue.

Just the street talk to grow into a legend.

The sons and an almost endless stream of debts devoured the money and property old Tom left. The creditors got more than the lawyers, the lawyers more than the heirs. All three groups searched the Princess. Walls were tapped and measurements made. The searches were thorough.

Nothing was found.

In time, the three sons married, each sired a child, then died. The three children — Wendy, Rod and Bill — were left as heirs to the gold in the hotel never-never land. All this Mike Shayne remembered as he and Wendy ate.

Then he remembered something else.

"The hotel is being torn down," he said.

Wendy put back her head and laughed. It was a clear silvery laugh that went with her youth and beauty. It was not at all the laugh one might expect from a girl carrying a knife in a leg holster. The corners of her mouth crinkled and her short cut black hair tossed at the nape of her soft neck.

"So you finally caught on, Uncle Mike?" she said. "That's right. The hotel is being demolished to make way for a new high rise. Everything is coming down, bit by bit. All the marble and plaster and

wood and the concrete blocks, one by one. Grandfather's gold is going to be found at last."

"If there is any gold in there," Mike Shayne cautioned.

"Oh there is," Wendy spoke with absolute conviction. "That's the one thing all the family knows for sure. We even know how much — about a half million dollars in pure soft yellow gold that it's legal for us citizens in the U. S. of A. to own once more. It's hidden in there and it's going to be found. They're taking the Princess down brick by brick. All the skeletons in the walls will be found, also all the gold."

"That's all very well," Mike Shayne said, "but who actually owns the gold if it really is found."

"We all do," Wendy told him. "We made a pact when we were kids to split it three ways even. We signed it in blood like kids do and Rod and Bill and I each kept a copy. I was a lot younger than the others, but even I knew enough to keep my copy where nobody could find it."

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, Wendy," the detective said. "What I'm talking about is legal ownership. your family hasn't owned the Princess for twenty years at least. Doesn't whoever holds legal title own the gold and anything else in the hotel too?"

She gave him a near-scornful look.

"Not now," she said. "Not any

longer. Not since the Princess is coming down. We thought of that."

"How?"

"Simple as pie. Can't you guess?"

"You tell me."

"Okay then. You would think of it though," she said. "My cousin Rod's construction company is doing the demolition. As part of the price he gets full salvage rights for the plumbing and everything else in the building. The owners are a mortgage company in Chicago which foreclosed on the last people who operated the hotel. None of them have ever been in Miami or heard about any treasure. Rod quoted them a low bid to knock the old Princess down."

"I'll be damned!" the redhead said.

"I thought you would," Wendy said. "We thought it was a pretty smart idea, too."

Wendy sat back in her chair, mopped up the last of the ham grease and managed to look smug as only an assured young woman can.

"So," the detective said, "the three of you have everything all mapped out and locked up to go your way."

"That's right, Uncle Mike."

"Then suppose you tell me why you were being chased around under the expressway at two in the morning by a bunch of thugs. If everything is going so smoothly,

what was that all about? Who were they, and what did they want?"

He thought the questions would deflate her. They did nothing of the sort.

"Oh," she said. "You're supposed to be the detective. You know perfectly well that partners always fall out when it comes to the crunch of digging up a treasure and dividing it. Ever since Pew and Long John Silver.

"Cousin Rod has a paper giving him salvage of the Princess, so of course that gives him first lick at any treasure that's found. Now you *must* know cousin Rod. Do you think he's going to want to split three ways even with Bill and me just because we have a couple of bits of paper signed in blood when we were all kids? Do you really believe that?"

Shayne thought over what he knew about Rod Jeffers, the oldest and most successful and toughest of the three Jeffers cousins.

He found himself agreeing with Wendy. Rod Jeffers would not be a man to give up tamely two thirds of a fortune in buried gold.

"Bill and I and Sally — that's Bill's wife — decided we couldn't trust Rod one inch," the girl said. "We decided we'd better watch every minute, so if the gold was found we'd know about it, too. It'd be just like Rod to hide it again and swear he never found a thing. That's what I was doing tonight — watching and looking for traces the gold had been found — when

III

those three goons stumbled on me. I ran. What would you have done in my place?"

Something told Mike Shayne he wasn't getting quite the whole story, but he decided to keep his peace about that and see how much she told him.

"You think those were Rod's men?"

"Of course. I recognized the big one with the club."

She stood up and walked over to look out the window of the kitchen at the night sky. To the north, just across the Miami River, the sky was hideous with the bright yellow sodium "high crime" lights.

The famous Moon over Miami could never penetrate that ugly glare.

The rifle bullet smashed the window glass and passed within a couple of inches of Wendy Jeffers' forehead.

She stood frozen in her tracks in front of the shattered window pane, but Shayne reacted instantly.

His right hand caught the girl and dragged her to the floor while his left pulled the master switch which cut off all electricity and plunged the apartment into darkness.

Only then did he take a quick look out the window.

As he expected, he could see nothing unusual. Not even a car moved in the street below.

MIKE SHAYNE KEPT his apartment light off for the rest of that night. He did not believe the sniper would linger about to try again, but there was nothing to gain by taking a chance.

The shot did convince the big man that there was real danger for Wendy Jeffers. He made her stay in the apartment and lie down fully clothed in the bedroom while he sat in the living room and kept guard.

He didn't expect the girl to sleep — and she didn't — but she got some rest and Shayne had a chance to ponder the situation.

He couldn't discount its seriousness any longer. The rifle shot was as real as the slug embedded in his kitchen wall. Somebody wanted to kill Wendy Jeffers — and Mike Shayne was not the man to let her walk out of his apartment in the morning under the muzzle of a killer's gun.

He thought of calling his good friend Will Gentry, Miami's Chief of Police, then discarded the idea. Under the circumstances, Wendy Jeffers wouldn't be about to tell the truth to any policeman. She would refuse protection in order to keep herself free to search for the treasure. Unless she cooperated, there was no way the police could hold or protect her.

The detective had known the girl's parents fairly well when Wendy was five or six years old —

hence the "Uncle Mike"

Shortly afterwards both parents had died — one by pneumonia, the other via a car crash — and the redhead had lost track of the family. He had never known either Bill or Rod Jeffers or their parents.

To any other man, this might have been a tenuous basis on which to assume even temporary responsibility for the girl. But Mike Shayne was Mike Shayne and had his own standards, regardless of what another man might do.

At least until he could turn her over to someone who could guarantee her safety, he would not abandon Wendy Jeffers.

As a rule, during recent years, the reheaded detective did not accept new clients unless they came both well recommended by sources he trusted and were financially capable of absorbing the stiff fees he charged. His years of hustling the market lay far behind him.

Shayne's secondary impulse was to send Wendy Jeffers on her way once her immediate safety was ensured. But she had not appealed to him in a client-agent relationship. Their meeting had come through happenstance and he felt himself engulfed in an aura of responsibility toward her.

As a client, he had an idea she would be unruly at the least. He already knew her to be impulsive, headstrong, rash — and for these very reasons, plus the fact of his

friendship with her family, he knew he was not going to let her face her foes unprotected.

He sighed and reached for the Martell with a definite sense of being hooked. Even if Wendy tried to ditch him, he knew he was going to have to hang on, letting the fees, if any, fall where they might.

He respected her foolhardy guts. No, he could not, would not, abandon her to her foes...

After a while he dozed — secure in the fact that no one would try to break into his apartment.

When he awoke dawn was beginning to lighten the sky in the East across Biscayne Bay. Wendy was still drowsing as Mike Shayne washed and shaved and changed to a clean shirt.

By now he had decided that the best thing would be to contact her two cousins and determine if she could be safely left with either one. He looked up their addresses in the phone book and found both of them lived near the fringe of the downtown area.

He woke Wendy about seven o'clock and told her what he planned. He wasn't sure that the girl liked the idea. She kept a poker face.

However the big detective didn't *ask* — he *told* her what they were going to do.

"So now you really believe I'm in danger?" she said.

"I do," Mike Shayne replied. "People don't fire rifles through

my window for sport. Which one of your relatives do you think was the most likely to be responsible for that?"

"You pays your money and you takes your choice," she said glibly. "Rod is tough enough to try to kill me, and greedy enough to want me dead. On top of that, he has plenty of money to pay a hit man to do the dirty work for him. He's a rough man in a rough business and probably thinks he has more to lose than Bill or I. There's a rumor his business is in over its head to a loan shark."

"Interesting," Shayne said. "But it doesn't prove anything. How about your other cousin, Bill?"

"There's another odd one," Wendy answered. "Bill is just as greedy as Rod — or as me for that matter. It runs in the family. On the other hand, he never had anything. The best job he ever had is the one he's got now. He teaches math in junior high. On top of that, his Sally is an expensive wife. If he made a thousand dollars a week, he'd be lucky if she had lunch money left over to give him. He needs money and he craves money. That's for sure."

"A lot of people do," Mike Shayne said. "But most of them would stop short of killing to get it. How about cousin Bill?"

"I'm damned if I know," Wendy said. "I honestly don't. Rod would — I'm sure of that. Bill might want to, but I don't

really think he has the nerve."

"An expensive wife can provide a lot of nerve," Mike Shayne said. "I've seen it happen many times. Well now, which one should we see first?"

The phone rang and took the need for making that decision out of their hands.

"This is Rod Jeffers," said a man's voice when Mike Shayne picked up the instrument. "I understand you've got that crazy kid cousin of mine up there with you. Right?"

"What makes you want to know?"

"Family affection," the voice said. "Besides, if she's had all night to work on you, I suppose you're into this mess right up to your neck."

If he expected any comment, from Mike Shayne on this last remark, he didn't get it. The big detective just held the phone and said nothing.

Jeffers didn't wait long. "I think we'd better have a talk, Shayne," He said. "I've called my cousin Bill and he and his woman are on their way over here. Bring Wendy along. The rest of the Princess has to come down in a day or two. I can't stall longer than that. Things will have to be settled. Okay?"

It didn't take the rehead long to make up his mind. This sort of meeting was just what he wanted.

"We'll be there," he said. "Give us half an hour."

IV

ROD JEFFERS' BIG HOUSE was one of the old homes between Brickley and Miami Avenues.

It had once been one of the city's showplaces, but since the wall of high-rises had gone up on the edge of the Bay, the whole area had deteriorated.

Mike Shayne parked his car a couple of blocks away from the house. He and Wendy walked the rest of the way. The girl was quiet, her eyes thoughtful. Shayne was quite sure she still had her knife in the leg holster. He wished he could be equally sure that she wouldn't try to use it.

A servant showed them to a big sunny dining room in the front of the house. The others were waiting around a table loaded with coffee and Danish pastries.

There was also a bottle of Scotch in front of the host, and he reached out to pour himself a stiff shot.

Rod Jeffers was a big man, almost as big as Shayne, but ruddy and soft with muscles sheathed in fat. His face was red and he had a mop of longish white hair. Only his pale blue eyes were hard and tough enough to fit his reputation. His expression at the moment was petulant and annoyed.

Cousin Bill was much more like Wendy — slender of build and thin of face. His eyes also were blue but hooded and blank so that they told Mike Shayne very little. He had the precise mannerisms of

a teacher — and the conservative dark suit which went with the manner. Except for hooded eyes, he did not look in any way exceptional.

The same could not be said for Bill Jeffer's wife, Sally. Shayne looked at her, then found his eyes locked to hers. His first impression was of a tramp trying to look like a teacher. Her hair was dyed a mousy blonde but the roots were platinum. Her figure, masked by a conservative loose-fitting dress, had been — perhaps still was — spectacular. Her eyes were large and grey and very shrewd.

Mike Shayne had a feeling he had seen this woman before, under dramatic circumstances, but he could not remember where or when. If he had known her — and he was almost sure that he had, — it was not under the name of Jeffers. He almost expected to see recognition in her eyes, but she kept her expression well guarded.

Together, Shayne thought, they were an unusual trio.

The detective had a feeling that any one of them was quite capable of having fired the shot of the night before. For the first time he sensed an element of menace in the case. He knew he couldn't walk away and leave Wendy in the hands of these relatives of hers. Like it or not, he was stuck with it.

They gave him little time for meditation.

"You know we don't want you in this, Shayne." Rod Jeffers spoke

abruptly. "You're dealing yourself into a game that is none of your business. So why not just butt out before you get hurt?"

"I'm here in my professional capacity," the detective replied.

"Uncle Mike represents me," Wendy Jeffers said. "I hired him last night when your three thugs had me cornered."

They hadn't discussed it before and certainly no formal agreement had been made, but Shayne let it pass. This was hardly the moment to pick up on such a point. Besides, he had asked for it.

Bill Jeffers was not so complaisant about it. "A hell of a lot of trust in your own blood that shows," he snapped at Wendy. "You know we agreed nobody but us was to know about this."

"Sure," Wendy snapped back with equal vehemence, and looking him straight in the eye. "only I didn't know that included the three goons chasing me last night or the man who tried to shoot me through Uncle Mike's window. Who let *them* in on our big family secret."

"Shoot you!" big Rod Jeffers sounded genuinely surprised. "What the hell do you mean — tried to shoot you?"

Either he really didn't know about the shooting, the redhead decided, or Rod was a very fine actor indeed.

Bill and Sally looked shocked too — or at least they made a good show of it. These two had him

baffled. He read them as a pair of cold fish and decided they would need careful watching.

"She's right," Mike Shayne said. "I've got a broken window glass and a slug in my kitchen wall to prove it."

"Damnation!" Rod slammed a hand on the table so hard the plates and cups rattled. "Fun is fun, and money is money. There's a plenty I'd do for all that gold, but killing is something else again. Killing little Wendy here — I want to know who tried that. He'll have to reckon with me."

"Of course. Of course, Rod, we agree," Bill said. "You realize now that if outsiders *are* in this treasure hunt, we'd better wind it up fast. We can't afford to let strangers beat us to the gold."

The others nodded.

Shayne said. "You all seem awfully damn sure about the gold many others have looked for the treasure — plenty of others — for forty years, and nobody has found so much as one coin or a show of color in the pan. How come you're so sure there is any gold."

"Because old Tom told our parents and our parents told us" Bill Jeffers spoke with certainty. "Tom Jeffers put his gold in the Princess. That's for sure."

"Hold on," the detective cautioned. "Can you be absolutely sure nobody *did* find the gold and take it out and keep it secret? It could have happened. You'd be the last people to know if it did."

"We're not much complete fools," Rod said. "Ever since the hotel went out of the family I, have had some of the hotel employees on my pay-roll. I'd have heard if anything was found. I did hear every time anyone nosed around for it. Finding that gold would have left traces."

"Okay."

"Now here's what I want us to do," Rod said. "My dear cousins here think I'm holding out on you. I want us all — you too, Shayne — to go to the hotel right now and look the shell of it over. You can satisfy yourselves there aren't any unexplained holes in the walls. Maybe one of us will see something that will give a clue to what we've missed so far. If so, we all win. At least, it's worth trying."

It was so agreed. Rod took Bill and Sally in his car, and Wendy rode with Shayne,

The Princess had been but one of a galaxy of expensive hotels, apartments and stores in the big bend of the Miami River near its mouth. Now almost all the original buildings were gone. Half the lots were either cleared rubble or had vanished under the loops and bends of the new expressway system.

The YWCA building, since bankrupt, sold and resold for business stood with one other new high-rise structures. A couple of old apartment buildings — crumbling and emptied of tenants who had in some cases lived there

for thirty years and more — rose bare and crumbling, waiting only for the wrecker's ball.

The once proud Princess was now an empty hulk that had been stripped of most of its trim. The famous fountain of the Little Princess was still in the central courtyard, but it had long since ceased to flow and the fish were long gone. Inside the basin there were still a few inches of rain-water, green and scummed with algae. The cement-filled copper shell of the statue was also green with corrosion. One of the princess' hands had been broken off at the wrist.

All light fixtures and plumbing had been torn away by Rod's crews for salvage.

"We tested the pipes," Rod said to Shayne, "They were all lead or copper or iron. Old Tom hadn't put in any solid gold plumbing. We even broke into the old cesspools that haven't been used for years. I went in there myself. No gold. I admit I'd thought it might be there. It would have suited old Tom's sense of humor. But nothing was there but old rot."

The thought of the arrogant Rod Jeffers climbing around in the stinking detritus of old cesspools amused the redhead, but he was careful not to let it show.

They spent almost two hours clambering about the old hotel, with absolutely no result.

When they returned to the

courtyard Shayne again studied the graceful little statue in the fountain. The broken hand and wrist showed that it was a mere shell of copper filled with cement.

Rod Jeffers followed the big detective's glance and smiled. "Not a chance, Shayne," he said. "A solid gold princess was the first thing we thought of. While our parents still owned the place, we took the statue down and broke it up. This is just a copy..... Princess number two."

"I just wondered."

"Old Tom wasn't that stupid," Rod told him.

As they stood in a group before separating, Shayne felt himself jostled lightly. He was sure that a hand had slipped something into his right hand jacket pocket but was careful to show no sign. Time enough to investigate later on...

V

WENDY JEFFERS WANTED to go home after the climb through the old hotel, but Shayne had other ideas. He took her to his Flagler Street office and turned her over to Lucy Hamilton with firm instructions that the two women not get out of each others' sight till he returned.

"Where are you going?" Lucy asked.

"Just a few details I have to check into," the redheaded detective told her. "Order some lunch sent in and Wendy is to take

no phone calls. If somebody calls for her, she's not here. Let them leave a number and I'll handle it when I get back. Is that clear?"

"It's as clear to me as a jail door slamming," Wendy said. "Uncle Mike, when we were in the Princess this morning I tried to look at all the workmen, but I didn't see the goons who chased me last night."

"I didn't see anybody I recognized either," Shayne agreed. "Of course, they could have taken care to keep out of sight. I think I'd have recognized the big one with the club, but I'm not sure about the other two. Everything happened too fast and the light was lousy. But I'm keeping that trio in mind."

Before he left the office, the red-head went into the washroom and checked his jacket pocket.

As he had thought, there was a folded sheet of paper inside. Opened, it read, *must see you — life and death!* It also listed a street and apartment number.

There was no signature, but the handwriting was feminine. Shayne figured it had to be from Sally Jeffers. He folded the note carefully and put it in his filing cabinet under S.

The address was that of an old apartment building just west of the Miami River, a couple of blocks south of Flagler Street. It was an easy ten minute walk from the detective's office.

He circled the block on which

the building was located before going inside, but saw nothing suspicious nor anyone he recognized. The area was part of "Little Havana," and the streets were full of people and with Cuban-accented Spanish chatter.

When he reached the building a second time, he saw a curtain pulled back behind a second floor corner window as if someone inside were watching the street. The location fitted the apartment number left in his packet, so Shayne decided to go on up.

The apartment door opened instantly to his knock.

The woman who let him in was Sally Jeffers, as expected. She wore a red dress that was loose but managed somehow to reveal the opulence of her hips and breasts. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was swinging loose. She had slapped on a perfume both strong and provocative. Her smile was seductive.

"Come in, Mike Shayne," she said softly. "I like you and I trust you — which I don't anybody else in this crazy treasure hunt. I felt it was time we got together."

Shayne stepped in and she closed the door behind him; locked and bolted it and checked to make sure that the drapes were drawn.

The apartment was a roomy efficiency flat of a type often found in older Miami residential buildings. The room was furnished like a living room but a double bed stood against one side wall.

Opposite were the stove and small refrigerator. An alcove held toilet; sink and shower.

The furnishings, bedspread and fittings were plain, and the detective felt sure that behind the door of the single small closet men's clothes would be hanging instead of women's.

Unless, he thought, she kept a robe and pajamas handy.

This was not the home address of Bill and Sally Jeffers. She did not give him time for much looking around, however.

"Come over here and make yourself comfortable," she said, leading him across the room to a table and straight chair near the head of the bed. There were two glasses, a pitcher of water and newly opened bottle of Martell brandy on the table.

Sally had obviously taken the trouble to find out the big man's favorite drink.

"You might pour us a drink," she said matter-of-factly. But the look she flashed his way from heavily made-up eyes was far away from matter-of-fact.

She sat down on the bed, leaving room for Shayne to sit between her and the table. The rehead considered taking the single chair, then decided to see how far Sally was prepared to go — and why.

He poured a stiff shot of brandy in each glass. She picked up hers and drank some of the liquor in one quick belt like a man.

It convinced Shayne that the liquor wasn't doped, so he took a sip from his own glass. It was excellent brandy that lived up to its label and he held it appreciatively to warm in his hand.

"Drink all you want," Sally said. "There's another bottle if you finish this."

He said, "Thanks but I never drink all I want when I'm working. Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

"You *know* what it's all about," she said flatly. "There's gold in what's left of that old hotel. Tom Jeffers put it there."

She saw the doubt in his eyes, and went on. "Don't look like that, Shayne. My God! haven't I heard Rod and Bill and even Wendy talk about it for Jesus only knows how many years? They're sure of it, and that's good enough for me."

"So?" Shayne said.

"So I want my loving share of it," she said. She had slid over on the bed till her leg lay beside Shayne's and he could feel her tenseness. "I want it, I need it, and I'm not going to be cheated out of it by Rod or that lousy tin horn I'm married to — or that little slut of a girl either. I need help; and I need you to help me. That's what I need, by God!"

She stopped to swallow the rest of the brandy in her glass and then seemed to remember how closely she was pressed against her companion.

He could feel the change when

she decided to play seductive and gentled her curves. She looked up at him and her eyes, under the liner and mascara were hot and angry and loaded with invitation, all at the same time.

"Help me, Mike Shayne," she said — it was command and plea and invitation all at once. "*Help me!*"

Her hot mouth slid up against his and she began to push him down on the bed. He could sense both lust, and hate blazing within her. He could possess that lush female body right then and knew it and was tempted.

Instead, he pushed himself up to a sitting position and began to untangle himself.

"Easy, honey," he said. "Not now." "We simply don't have time for games at this point. There's too much to be done and too little time to do it in. Suppose you just tell me what you know and what you want done about it."

"You *will* help me?"

"Talk," he said. "I can only promise you one thing. I'll help find the gold if I can, and I won't let anyone cut you out of your share."

It wasn't the promise she wanted, but she didn't choose to labor the point. They still sat close together and she poured them another good belt of the brandy.

"I know you'll find the gold," she said. "You've got a fresh view and you're trained for this sort of thing. If that old bastard could

think of a place to hide it, you can go back in time and puzzle out his thinking. You can figure out where he put it. You *can* — can't you? You can *do* that?"

"I don't know," Shayne spoke honestly. "Perhaps."

"Meet me in the lobby right after dark," she said. "We'll look around together. I know you'll *smell* that gold. *Please...*"

"Okay," the detective nodded. He didn't know what else to say at that moment.

"You can stay here till dark," she said, and tried to put her arms around him again. "We can make this a real party, lover."

This time he got up before she could renew their kiss. "That's just exactly what I *can't* do. There's too much to be done between now and tonight. I have to do some research for one thing. What sort of gold did Tom have? Bricks of it, or coin, or dust, or nuggets, or even jewelry? There may be an old timer in Miami who knows. He had to get it somewhere and *from* somebody."

She forgot all about making love.

"My God, you're smart," she said. "None of *them* ever thought of that. I'll split with you, Shayne. You and me and all that gold and a water bed in the best hotel in Rio."

Shayne left her on the bed and let himself out of the apartment. He hadn't been lying. There *were* a lot of things he had to check out.

He looked up and down the sidewalk as he came out the doorway. No one was on the walk but a group of women with shopping bags partway down the block.

He didn't see the battered pick-up truck at all till after he heard the engine roar to life as the driver gunned it hard.

Instinct alone — instinct bred and honed by years in one of the world's most dangerous professions — made him duck back into the doorway of the apartment building at the sound.

That instinct saved his life.

The car raced down the street, climbed the curb — and would have hit the detective if he had stayed on the walk to await the impact. Then, it roared past and turned the corner with screeching tires.

The whole bit happened so fast that the Cuban women with the shopping bags failed to notice the near disaster.

Mike Shayne got barely a glimpse of the driver who had tried to kill him — barely enough to see that it was a man. He didn't see the license plate of the vehicle at all.

He considered going back inside to confront Sally Jeffers, then rejected the idea. Since she had been trying to seduce or recruit him — or both — and presumably had thought herself well on the way to success, this would hardly be an attack she had arranged:

More probably it stemmed from

the man who had tried to kill Wendy with the rifle the night before.

What or whoever was behind it, the incident served to reemphasize the deadliness of the game in which Mike Shayne was involved.

He walked carefully to his office. The truck was nowhere to be seen.

VI

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE got back to Flagler Street, the door was locked from within, but Lucy Hamilton opened to the sound of his voice. He sent the two girls to Lucy's apartment, saying he wanted to be alone for a while, and promising to pick them up for dinner. He said nothing of where he had been or what he had been doing.

As soon as they were gone, the detective locked the door and got on the phone. He began calling jewelers and goldsmiths who were old enough to have been in business in Miami when the late Tom Jeffers was building his fancy Princess Hotel.

He asked the same question of each of them. "Where did Tom Jeffers get the gold he was supposed to have buried?"

None could give him an answer. Several said roughly the same thing. — "I wondered about that at the time the stories started. He could have bought it through me, but he didn't. None of my friends

knew anything about it, either."

Finally he reached the son of a well-known Miami jeweler who had made a famous pair of diamond cufflinks for the senior Jeffers.

"Dad did a lot of work for old Tom Jeffers. Mostly custom jewelry, and very expensive. He would have been the most likely person to furnish that gold, but he told me he knew nothing about it. Dad wouldn't lie to me. I think he was a little hurt that he *didn't* get the business, but didn't like to say so. I'm sorry, Shayne."

"I'm sorry, too," the detective said. "One thing more though — could you make an educated guess?"

"If I did," the jeweler said, "it would be that it wasn't American gold at all. If that amount had come into town, one of us in the trade would have had to handle it, and nobody did. I think it was foreign and came in through some of his bootleg contacts in the Bahamas."

"That sounds likely," Shayne agreed. "Do you have any idea what sort of gold it could have been?"

"Sure I do, Mike," was the answer. "Coming in that way, it would have just about had to be gold bars. Coinage would sell at a premium he wouldn't have wanted to pay. Dust or nuggets would be too hard to handle and liable to pilferage. If it was me, I'd have bought bars."

Thanks a lot," the redhead said.

"One more thing, Mike. The bars would have to reasonably small because gold is heavy. Anything the size of a shoebox would be too much for one man to handle, and Tom is supposed to have done the job by himself. I'd say anything from the size of a squared-off wienie to about that of an ordinary brick."

He hung up, leaving the big man with a lot to think about.

Bricks — that stuck in Mike Shayne's mind. The traditional gold bricks built right in with the ordinary kind. But where?

The main construction of the hotel was cement block and poured concrete with steel reinforcement, but there must be thousands of bricks in the trim, in the floors, in the ornamental balconies — perhaps in special support columns under some of the floors and in the basements.

Suppose old Tom Jeffers had put the bricks in singly — one here and one there — instead of all together.

He could have.

Finding a particular brick in the Princess would be like getting a particular straw out of a haystack.

That is, if they were still bricks. The gold could have been melted down and poured into the wall — or into a mold.

"*The only thing to do,*" Shayne told himself, *Is what I told Sally. I've literally got to go back forty*

years and outthink old Tom Jeffers.

After a while he left his office and walked back through the busy afternoon downtown area towards the condemned hote. On Flagler Street the sidewalks were full of tourists, most of them from Central or South America or Cuba.

A couple of blocks west, the crowd thinned out. This was the area of demolition. Some of the blocks were swept almost bare of rubble and awaited new construction.

At the Princess, a few workmen were busy preparing the building for the final blast that would bring it down. The demolition charges had not yet been planted but the places where they would go had been marked and wires were being run.

Shayne found Rod Jeffers watching the work from the central courtyard of the old hotel and walked over to join him.

Rod Jeffers offered Mike Shayne a good cigar and they both lit up and stood savoring the fine aroma. In spite of himself the redhead rather liked the big contractor. The man was greedy, of course — but in a rough-and-tumble way. If there *was* treasure in the hulk of the building, and he could get it away from his two cousins, Shayne was pretty sure he wouldn't hesitate to do so. On the other hand, Rod didn't strike him as a cold-blooded murderer.

He voiced the thought.

"There's a killer in this, Rod," he said. "but I don't really think it's you."

Rod took the cigar out of his mouth and snorted. Then he said, "I don't think it's you, either, Shayne. No — that's not fair. I just don't take the killer idea seriously. I know I wouldn't kill for money, and I don't think those poor fools of cousins of mine would, either."

"I really don't. Wendy was being chased by somebody last night, but it could just as well have been some punks trying to rape her as anything else. Couldn't it? A body like hers has no business out alone as night in downtown Miami these days."

That could be true — but Shayne said, "There's a rifle slug in my kitchen wall."

"That smells like trouble," Rod said, "but it doesn't absolutely have to mean murder unless it actually killed somebody. Which it didn't. Whoever fired that shot might just have wanted to frighten Wendy. Or scare you off."

He saw the look on Mike Shayne's face and amended that. "Oh, I'll grant nobody but a first-class damn fool would think you'd scare. Still it could even have been a stray shot and not even aimed at your window at all. What do you think about that?"

"It *could* have been," Mike Shayne said, "but I don't think it *was*. The timing was too exactly right for an aimed shot, and too much of a coincidence if it wasn't.

What do you think of your two cousins. Would either of them kill?"

Rod Jeffers exhaled expensive smoke into the afternoon air. "That's one hell of a question to ask a man — let alone a loving cousin. I don't honestly know."

"Make an educated guess," Shayne urged him.

"Well, if you put it *that way* — hmm. An educated guess you say? Then I'd put it this way.

"Little Wendy could kill if she was mad enough. She's a real spitfire. But I doubt she could plan and execute a Murder One. It takes a special sort of person to do that sort of thing, and Wendy-baby isn't it.

"Bill, on the other hand, has the only real mean streak I know of in the family. He could plan a killing, all right. I just don't think he has the nerve to go through with it.

"You wanted an opinion? You have it."

Mike Shayne laughed. Then he said, "How about *you*, Rod? How do *you* stack up?"

"I suppose I ought to break your neck for asking that," Rod replied. "I don't know if I could kill or not. I do know I never have, if that does you any good. Anyway, I don't think I could or would kill for money — and certainly not kill a relative for money.

"That seems like a particularly lousy thing to do. Maybe if I was a poor man I'd think different about it. But I'm not. I don't need

to kill for money. So you'd better rule me out as far as killing goes."

Shayne noted Rod Jeffers didn't quite rule himself out as far as taking the money was concerned, but then Rod put a footnote to that.

"For the rest of it, Shayne, I don't know, either. Bill and that wife of his are so hungry for all that gold I might do them out of it if I kicked it up while they weren't looking. I don't really say I would, of course.

"Little Wendy is different. She's the sort who would share her last sandwich with a hungry puppy. Besides, she really needs the cash. Her parents left nothing but debts and I keep her going with a loan once in a while as it is.

"You see, it's not really a simple thing to decide. It might be easier if we'd actually found the gold. But we haven't done that yet."

"Do you think it *will* be found?" Shayne asked.

"I really do because I'm sure it's in there. If we don't get it out before we blast the old girl down in a couple of days, somebody will find it or sift it out of the rubble. If it's after the junk is carted away, it would probably be finders-keepers, and I may not see it. But it's in there okay. What troubles me is why we haven't found it yet."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Because old Tom was too smart for me," Rod admitted.

"I always thought I knew how his mind worked. He'd hide the gold, I figured, but he'd do it right out in the open like he was daring people to find it. My first guess was the statue over there, but that was tried long ago.

"I've looked at fancy mouldings, columns, stair rails—everything I could think of. I'm beginning to believe maybe he did the *really* smart thing and dumped it into a wall someplace at random and never marked down where.

"So we blow the building in a day or so and—*whammo!* Ashes to ashes and gold dust to gold dust, and you'd have to pan the whole mess like a prospector in forty nine to get any of it back."

The redhead was interested. That was the sort of thinking he had had about old Tom Jeffers. He'd put the gold out in the open and maybe slap some paint on it and dare the world to come and find it.

Then Shayne had a chilling thought.

Maybe that was just what Old Tom had done.

And maybe, in all the years that had passed, somebody had solved the puzzle and found the gold and taken it away and plastered or painted over the place where it had been.

"I can tell by your expression what you're thinking," Rod Jeffers said with a wry grin. "What if some joker beat us to it and just kept his mouth shut?"

That's what's in your mind, isn't it?"

Shayne nodded, began to speak. He was interrupted by a man running from the trailer the demolition crew had been using as a headquarters.

"Phone call for you, boss," he said to Jeffers.

Rod Jeffers walked over to the trailer. He was back within a couple of minutes, and his rugged face was grave.

"That was Jackson Hospital," he told the detective. It's my cousin Bill. He was just brought in. D.O.A."

He saw the question in the redhead's face and continued. "No—not murder. No rifle bullet—just a hit-run accident on the street in front of his home. A couple of neighbors heard the thud when he was hit, but nobody saw who did it. I've got to get over to the hospital."

Then he said, "Well, at least one of us has stopped worrying about the gold."

He walked away, leaving Mike Shayne standing in front of the shell of the old hotel.

Just a hit-run accident . . . the detective thought. That's what almost happened to him in front of Sally's hideaway.

He wondered if it had been an old and battered pickup truck that had struck Bill Jeffers down.

Whatever it was it had eliminated one prime suspect as well as one treasure hunter. Until then,

Shayne had had half a suspicion that Bill Jeffers might have been the driver of the old truck which almost scraped him off the sidewalk.

VII

Mike Shayne walked back up Flagler Street and got his own car out of the parking lot behind his office. He drove straight up Biscayne Boulevard to Lucy Hamilton's apartment on the near north-east side a few blocks north of where the new Omni Complex had been built.

One after one, the old familiar Miami neighborhoods were being razed and replaced, but so far this area of a few blocks had survived. In time, it too would vanish, but till that day came Lucy would stay in her familiar and comfortable apartment.

Inside, Shayne found his beautiful secretary and a nervous, extremely restless Wendy Jeffers, who was pacing the floor.

Lucy Hamilton was trying to keep the girl calmed down without much success.

"Thank God you finally showed up!" Wendy said angrily to Shayne. "I've got to say it's about time. You can't keep me penned up here like a prisoner with time running out on us all. I'm going crazy. What are we going to do?"

"First of all, there are some things we've got to get straight between us," Mike Shayne said.

"I don't see why I can't go out and look around by myself—"

she began, but Mike Shayne cut her off.

"One reason is because your cousin Bill was doing that, and he's dead."

He saw the sudden shock in her face and went on. "The police think it was a hit-and-run. Nobody saw it happen. I'm convinced he was deliberately run down."

"Rod?" The girl said it almost in a whisper.

"No, not Rod. He was at the hotel and a mile away. I may even have been talking with him when it happened."

"Then *who*?"

"Until we know that, I don't want you out by yourself," Shayne told her. "You'd be making a target of yourself every time you tried to cross a street—let alone somebody trying to shoot you again like they did last night. If anybody's going to set himself up as a target, it had better be me"

"I never asked you to do that," Wendy said.

"That's what I want to talk to you about," the big redhead said. "I'm in this case right up to my ears and I can't remember anybody actually hiring me. I don't know who I'm working for—if anybody."

"That's all right, Uncle Mike," Wendy said. "I'll hire you. God knows I need help."

"You can't afford me," Shayne said bluntly. He wanted to see how she would meet that issue.

She met it head on. "I can if you find the gold. I'll pay you out of my share—and a big bonus too. I'll even let you tell me how much of a bonus is fair. I'll sign a paper if you want to have Lucy type one up."

"That won't be necessary," the detective said.

He was much relieved—not because she had offered to pay but because she had also answered his main question when she said, *My share*". She didn't want him to get all the gold for herself. The redhead wouldn't have gone for that.

Now he felt more at ease representing the girl.

"It'll still be a three-way split, I guess," he said. "Bill Jeffers didn't quite make it to the finish line, but it seems only fair his widow should inherit his share."

"I guess so." It didn't seem important to Wendy.

Shayne wondered how Rod would feel about that.

"That brings up another point," the detective said. "What do you think of Sally Jeffers? What do you really know about her?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," the girl replied. "We've never really been a close family, and Bill was a loner at that. I don't guess I saw the pair of them twice last year . . . and one of those times we bumped into each other by accident. I never really liked Sally, or she me."

"Where did they meet?"

Shayne asked.

"My guess is he picked her up in a singles bar, Uncle Mike. She worked in places like that. In a night club act, I think when she was younger and and when there were more of those places and the jobs that go with them around town. I think she married Bill after those jobs got scare or because she got too old to hold one."

"And you still don't object to her getting a share of the treasure?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"No, I *don't*. After all, Bill married her. Fair's fair. What would have been his should really go to her Now what do we do?"

"You stay right here," Mike Shayne said. "I'm going to try to set up another meeting at the hotel later on."

"Have you got any real idea where the gold is yet?"

"I think I do," the redhead said.

He left them on that note, although Wendy practically begged him to explain what he meant. Actually he regretted having admitted as much, but the words had slipped out.

He used the pay phone in the lobby instead of the one in Lucy Hamilton's apartment so he wouldn't be overheard. The number he called was Bill Jeffers'.

To his relief, the phone was answered and Sally Jeffers' voice uttered a strained, "Hello?"

"This is Mike Shayne. I want to see you right away."

"Thank God it's you, Mike,"

she said. There were both strain and sudden relief in her voice. "I was just about to try calling you at your office. You heard what happened to Bill?"

"Yes, I heard. That's part of what I want to talk to you about."

"I went to the hospital to identify the body," she said. "Mike, it was awful—all bloody and broken. Then I was coming back here to call you . . ." her voice choked.

"What do you mean—you were going home to call me? Did something else happen?"

"You're damned well right something else happened. That's what I have to talk to you about."

"What?" he asked, half-expecting the answer she gave him.

"What happened? What *happened* Why God damn it, Mike, somebody tried to kill me. That's what the hell happened—and I'm scared. You've got to get over here before he tries again and makes it stick this time."

"I'm on my way," Mike Shayne said.

VIII

HE FOUND SALLY JEFFERS behind locked and bolted doors in the modest one family house in Miami's southwest Shenandoah section a few blocks south of the Trail.

She was so nervous she fumbled with the locks and took a long time letting him in.

She looked pale and shaken.

The first thing she she did was pour them both a drink from a bottle of brandy on the living room table. It looked like the promised successor to the bottle from which she had served him a drink at the apartment earlier in the day.

Shayne didn't waste time trying to calm her down.

"You say somebody tried to kill you? he said. Tell me exactly what happened."

"It damned near worked," she told him, then gulped down a big belt of the brandy. "While I was in the morgue at Jackson Hospital, somebody cut the brake lines on my car. I found out when I drove out of the parking lot.

"One of those stupid Latinos turned the wrong way in front of me in the parking aisle. I braked hard and all of a sudden—no brakes. We were both going slow enough so it was only a fender bender. In real traffic on the expressway I could have been killed."

"I know because the cop who investigated got under the car to look. He says my brake lines were cut. I'll take his word for it."

"I guess you can at that," he said. "Now, the sixty-four-dollar question. Who was it? Who wants you dead badly enough to risk a charge of Murder One?"

"Don't be a damn fool, Mike," Sally snapped at him. "If I knew that, wouldn't I be down at the police station right now, telling *them* about it instead of *you*?"

"You might at that." Shayne tugged at his left earlobe. "If you knew and could prove it with hard evidence, you might blow the whistle. On the other hand, you might not. I don't really know you well enough to be sure. You could have your reasons."

"That's not fair," she said.

"What do you know about fair? Trying to seduce me when your husband was still alive? If you thought you knew who it was but couldn't prove it—*then* you'd want *me* to get the proof for you. Even then you might not call the police. There's the matter of explaining about the motive—about all that gold. A judge might want the court to take charge of the gold and then you might never see it again."

White-faced, struggling between fury and fear, she said, "Damn you, Shayne!"

"You'd better level with me," he told her. "Maybe I can help you . . . and maybe I will . . . but you'd better remember I just said *maybe*. I won't touch you with a ten-foot pole, though, unless you tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Up to now, that's the last thing you've been doing."

For a long moment she looked him straight in the eye. Her eyes were wide and grey and flecked with yellow like a cat's.

"Okay, big boy," she said. "I'll give it to you straight. The big bastard never done anything for

me, and he's no blood kin of mine. Well—what I mean is, it's got to be Rod Jeffers. It's not enough he's already got all the money in the family. He wants the rest of it — the gold. He's got the muscle to go after it."

"There's just one thing wrong with that," Shayne said. "Rod couldn't have killed your husband. There are witnesses, and I'm one of them, to put him at the hotel when Bill was run down."

"That means nothing." She tossed it off. "I didn't say he was driving the car. He has men who could do it for him—like the men who went after little Wendy. Or he could have hired a pro to hit Bill and me. He could afford it. It was Rod all right, and it's Rod who will get me if you don't help me, honey."

Shayne said "If he's already got all the money, why does he need the gold badly enough to kill for it?"

She had the answer ready. "Because he's already head over heels in debt is why. Everybody around town knows he bid so low to get the contract for the Princess that he'll go broke on that one job if he doesn't find the gold."

Out of the corner of an eye, Mike Shayne saw a flicker of movement in the back of the room.

Instinct made him move before he had time to mark and classify what he saw. He drove himself from a sitting position into a long dive at the woman before him so

that his bulk and momentum knocked her and her chair to the floor and partly under him.

At the same time, he saw the door to the kitchen pushed open a few inches and the muzzle of a revolver appear in the crack.

The hand holding the revolver pulled the trigger twice, but both shots went high and wide of pair on the floor.

Sally Jeffers screamed a high, thin scream like a broken-legged horse. The kitchen door closed.

Mike Shayne was trying to scramble up and pull his own gun from its belt holster over his right hip, but he wasn't fast enough. When he knocked Sally Jeffers out of the chair she had thrown her arms around him. Panic made her tighten the grip and hold on for dear life even as she screamed.

Shayne broke her grip and rolled free, but it took even him some time to do it. Then he had to get to his feet and draw his own gun.

Even then he could not charge blindly through the kitchen door as a stupider man might have done. It was a swinging door, so Shayne kicked it open and dived through—landing on his side with his gun hand free and ready to snap off an instant shot.

The back door to the house was partly open, and there was no one in the kitchen.

Shayne got to the door, but by then the yard was empty and there was no indication of a fleeing man.

The detective didn't even try to follow. There were a dozen routes his assailant might have followed and no way to pick the gunman out once he (or she) had reached the street.

The lock on the kitchen door was a cheap one and could have been opened with ease by using a pick or plastic card. He was not even sure that it had not been left unlocked either by carelessness or intention.

What better way to get him out of the picture than by luring him to an ambush at the house.

Still . . . Sally Jeffers' panic seemed too genuine for her to have known about the attack in advance.

IX

SALLY HAD PICKED herself up when Mike Shayne got back to the living room. Although her hands were still shaking uncontrollably, she was pouring herself another stiff jolt from the brandy bottle.

When Shayne came in she put the glass down—almost tipping it over in the process—and ran over and threw her arms around him.

"Oh my God!" she gasped with her mouth close to his. "Oh my God, Mike! Will you believe me now? He was trying to *kill* me. You saw it yourself."

Mike Shayne tried to pull free, but she kept his arms pinned to his side.

"What do you mean *he*? Did you see who it was?"

"I didn't see anything but that awful gun. Don't leave me, or he'll come back. You've *got* to help me. I'll split the gold with you, I swear I will. We can go away together. I'll make you happy, Mike. I swear I will!"

By now the closeness of their bodies combined with reaction to danger just past had begun to affect her emotionally. Her arms gripped him with both fear and passion. She pressed her lips against his neck and began kissing him furiously.

She pressed her breasts and belly against him, and gripped him even more tightly. Her face and body were throbbing.

"Please, Mike." She panted in his ear. "*Please!* We can make each other awfully happy, honey. You know we can. And with all that money. You *do* know where the gold is, don't you Mike?"

"I think so," the redhead told her, just managing to break loose from her grip on his arms. She still held onto him and tried to kiss him, but he kept his face out of the way of her lips and tongue.

"Oh!" she cried, her voice gravelled with desire. "I *knew* you'd be the one to figure it out. Where is it?"

"In the Princess, where I can find it," he said. That was all he had any intention of telling her.

"Let's get it," she begged. "Let's go and get it right now,

Mike, and get away from here before Rod kills us. He will, you know. We can take the gold to Brazil and be happy together."

Mike Shayne broke clear of her grip then and stepped back a couple of paces.

"Easy, girl," he said. "You haven't thought it out. That much gold is too heavy to walk away with, for one thing. For another, taking it out will leave traces Rod can spot. He'll know what we did."

As he hoped, his words wiped both greed and passion from her face and replaced them with stark fear.

"Oh my God, yes!" she said. "Then he'll kill us for sure."

"Of course," Shayne told her. He'll hunt us down wherever we go. As you said, he's got the money to hire killers."

"Then what can we do?"

Mike Shayne began to relax then. He had no intention of running off with a tramp like Sally, but he needed her cooperation to find both the gold and the killer. And he could get that cooperation only if she thought he had fallen for her idea.

"We'll do the only sensible thing," he explained. "I'll take you and Rod and Wendy to the hotel after dark tonight. I have a plan to convince the other two that there never was any gold or that somebody else has already found it. Then you and I will come back

for it and take it out bit by bit ourselves."

He hoped she would believe him. There were logical flaws in his "plan" which should have made her reject it in a minute, but she was half drunk and half out of her head with fear and greed.

Also—and this was what he counted on the most—she *wanted* to believe what he told her was true.

She said, "Oh, *darling!*" and moved in on the redhead again.

The doorbell rang.

They both jumped

Shayne got out his gun and stood against the wall beside the door.

He whispered, "Open it. I'll cover you."

Sally hesitated, eyed him narrowly. Then taking a deep breath, she walked over and opened the door.

Wendy came into the room. She started to say something to Sally, then saw Shayne against the wall, holding the gun in his fist. It was her turn to jump.

She said, "What the hell!"

"What are you doing here?" Shayne demanded. "I told you to stay with Lucy till I came for you."

Wendy didn't answer him directly. She just looked at him for a minute, then threw back her head and laughed.

"I won't ask you that question," she said. "Your face is covered with lipstick. Shame on you, Uncle Mike!"

"Don't jump to conclusions." It was a weak retort, but the best he could do at the moment.

"I was worried about you," Wendy told him, "and going out of my mind cooped up just sitting there. I slipped out when Lucy was in the john. I called Rod and you weren't there, so I decided to come here. Of course, I didn't know a big romance would be going on."

"No romance," Mike Shayne snapped. "If you think there was, look in the wall over there and you'll find a couple of bullet holes."

"Which of you was shooting at the other?" Wendy said in a flip tone.

"Neither of us," Sally Jeffers said. She was repairing her ravaged makeup. "But maybe you already know that. Maybe it was you who sneaked in the back way and fired those shots. You own a gun, don't you?"

Wendy didn't answer. She did go over and look at the holes in the plaster of the wall.

"Well, did you shoot?" Sally asked.

Wendy said, "If I had, I'd have hit you."

I'll bet you would have at that, Shayne thought. He gave Wendy the play-by-play on what had just happened.

"I want you two to be safe till after dark," he said, "so I'm going to take you both over to your cousin Rod's house. I know you're

afraid of him, Sally, but he wouldn't be fool enough to try anything if I leave you with him. Besides, you and Wendy stay together, you'll be perfectly safe that way."

"Will you be with us?"

"Most of the time—not all. There are a couple of things I have to do yet this afternoon."

He called Rod to be sure he was at home and told him the two women were on their way. Then he called a worried Lucy Hamilton to reassure her of Wendy's safety.

Afterward, he drove the two women to Rod's big home. They glared at each other like a couple jealous and suspicious house cats all the way.

He was quite certain Sally would not have gone at all if she hadn't believed him to be her co-conspirator.

A servant let them in. Rod had never married, but could afford plenty of help.

Mike Shayne wasted no time getting to the point.

"I think I can locate the gold for you," he said. "So there can't be any fight about whose gold it is, I'm going to take you to it together. If it's there, you can make your own arrangements about getting it out of the building."

"You can make your own deal about dividing it up, too. My interest is only in seeing that whatever arrangement you set up satisfies all of you—at least Wendy, as she's paying me."

He couldn't be sure what affect this last was having on Sally, but hoped she would let it pass, secure in the belief that he would help her rob the others.

"Okay," Wendy said. "Let's go, Uncle Mike."

"Not so fast," the big man checked her. "If we find that stuff in broad daylight, the word will get around town and there'll be ten thousand people climbing around the old wreck inside of half an hour. It might even collapse under them and somebody could get killed."

"We'll wait till after dark to check out my theory. If the gold is where I think it is, Rod here has legal title by the terms of his demolition contract. He can bring in whatever crew is needed in the morning to get it out and take it to a bank. You can even ask for an armored truck to move it. Trying to dig it up in the middle of the night when you have no legal title would just be sheer lunacy."

He paused, added, "We'll go over about ten o'clock tonight, when most of the pedestrian traffic will be out of that area."

"I'll take along a gun," Rod Jeffers said.

"You can give me one, too," Wendy said. "I know how to use it."

"That's just what I'm afraid of," Shayne reproved her. "You'd shoot the first wino who wandered in there to sleep it off, and then where would we all be? If anybody

goes armed, it will be me, and I want that understood before we go any further."

"He's got a point," Rod Jeffers conceded.

"Now," Shayne said, "I'm going to leave you for a while. I've got some business of my own to tend to, and I think you'll be perfectly safe if you stick together and don't let any strangers in the house while I'm gone."

He beckoned Rod out into the hall before he left. "Where do you keep the personnel records for this demolition job?"

"The bookkeeper has them in the trailer parked on the site. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to take a look at them. Is he down there now?"

"Sure," Rod said. "I'll phone him and tell him to let you see whatever you want."

"Thanks. It won't take long."

X

MIKE SHAYNE DROVE straight over from Rod Jeffers' house to the Princess Hotel, stopping only at a public phone booth a block away to call Lucy and set her mind further at rest about Wendy's safety and give her instructions for the evening to come.

At the construction trailer, the bookkeeper showed him the personnel and payroll records for the job.

It took the detective only about

ten minutes to find the information he wanted.

Afterward, he stood on the sidewalk across from the doomed hotel. There were only a few workmen about, making final preparations for the demolition to come.

Shayne was going over in his mind what he already knew of this baffling and deadly case. So far no one had actually died except Bill Jeffers, and his death might have been accidental. Either way, at this point, it would be extremely hard to prove.

It couldn't be proved murder unless the killer were caught—and the detective planned to do just that.

At the same time he wanted to find the gold. He believed he had penetrated the old pirate's mind sufficiently to know where to look. If he was right, he could show the cache to all three heirs at the same time, and thereby guarantee a fair division.

That was—if any of them had not been involved in the attempted killings. They could all have been guilty of different attempts.

If that were the case, Shayne wondered wryly, what might become of the gold. If there was gold—and if it was where he hoped and expected to find it.

He lit a cigaret as he contemplated the slanting late afternoon sunlight on the old hotel.

Suddenly, a chill came and touched the detective's spine.

Without knowing quite how he

knew it, he sensed that he was being watched. Somewhere, someone was gradually working his emotions towards the point of attack.

Mike Shayne walked back to his car. About halfway there he sensed that the watcher had turned away. The tension relaxed.

The redhead stopped at his own apartment to pick up some gear he might need if the evening worked out according to plan.

First of all, he checked the Colt .45 automatic he wore back of his right hip in a belt holster and slipped an extra clip of ammunition into a jacket pocket. Then he clipped to his belt a pair of handcuffs he had "borrowed" from his close friend Miami Chief of Police Will Gentry many years ago and conveniently forgotten to return.

To these items, he added "a small "night glass" which functioned by ultraviolet light. It was a device which had been developed by Army ordnance technicians for use by nocturnal patrols and snipers and later made available to civilians. Despite the extremely high cost, Shayne had more than once found it useful.

Last but not least, he changed his usual heavy black brogans for a pair of black canvas deck shoes with a composition sole which would make it easy to scramble about the shell of the old Princess Hotel, then placed near his door a short, heavy iron pry-bar often

used by burglars as a jimmy.

Thus prepared for the night to come, he poured himself a double shot of Martell on the rocks and sat back in his easy chair to relax.

The detective had the catlike gift of being able to extract the maximum amount of rest from any available short rest period.

As the brandy and the rest eased the tensions the day had built up, Shayne reviewed the confused events and checked the conclusions he had drawn from them.

They still seemed valid to the detective—but there was still a missing link. The pattern was not quite as perfect as he had thought an hour earlier. He could not quite put his finger on what was wrong and it troubled him.

Moments before, he had felt himself perfectly in control of the situation. Now that was no longer so.

After all he was playing the most dangerous of all games—that of forcing the issue on someone he was convinced had already killed once. The detective felt he was walking a deadly high wire—and did not like the sudden tremor he felt beneath his feet.

He lay quietly, spread out in the easy chair for long minutes while his mind cast back and forth like a hound along the tangled trails of this deadly affair.

In the end, Shayne had to admit himself baffled. The sense of something wrong was still there,

but he could not pin it down. So he did what he could, filing away the warning in his mind.

Then he forced himself to relax, and slept for an hour in the chair. He would need every ounce of strength he could command in the hours to come.

XI

ROD JEFFERS HAD invited Shayne to join the others for dinner at seven o'clock. It was a substantial meal including two-inch-thick steaks that could be cut with a fork and pie a la mode.

Give the condemned man a last meal, Shayne thought, and hoped that the old saw would not apply to himself.

Wines were served with the meal and the brandy bottle sat on the table, the redhead drank mostly coffee. After dinner Rod Jeffers produced an informal contract he had had typed up earlier in the day.

In it, he and Wendy and Sally admitted they were searching for an unspecified amount of gold, specie or other valuables said to have been hidden in the Princess Hotel by old Tom Jeffers.

They mutually agreed that, if the gold was found, it should be divided equally between them. Since none of the three had children, it was specifically stated that no other claim to the treasure by any person or persons should be admitted as valid.

The two women were perfectly ready to sign, although Wendy gave Mike Shayne a quizzical look as she did so. He wondered if she saw the same flaw in the document that he did, but only nodded slightly, so she signed.

The catch was, of course, that the paper automatically made the surviving parties sole heirs to the gold in case one or more died before it was found and divided.

Shayne and the cook were asked to sign as witnesses. The detective signed willingly. After all, it was none of his affair how the Jeffers family chose to dispose of the hidden treasure except to keep anyone else from being killed.

After the signing of the papers, it was time to start for the old hotel. Night had fallen.

It is never really dark, of course, in downtown Miami. The reflection of the many city lights, especially the sodium floodlights, took care of that.

However, after dusk, the side streets, more particularly those in the areas undergoing transition and near and under the steel and concrete expressway complexes, tended to become deserted very rapidly.

A few pimps and prostitutes were still about, as were the small time buyers and sellers of drugs and the little knots of teenage vandals and muggers. Honest citizens stayed away. To venture into the area would only serve to make targets of themselves.

Shayne had insisted they all ride in his car. He put the pry-bar on the floor behind the front seat. Also he took out of the trunk a small, expensive and very efficient walkie-talkie radio phone and slipped it into the left hand pocket of his jacket.

If the others wondered at that, they made no comment. The ride to the hotel was a short one.

Shayne parked his car next to the now-darkened construction trailer. He gave the pry-bar to Wendy to carry and locked the doors of the car.

They walked along the block to the front of the hotel and through the now open entrance, where grille-work gates had once barred the way, to the open courtyard around which the Princess had been built. The gates had already been taken down to leave an open archway.

Ahead lay the long rectangle of the courtway. The gate was in one of the short sides. At the rear, a sweeping staircase rose — touching open balconies on each of the first three floors. On these floors, the balcony went right around the courtyard and a row of rooms on each floor had opened onto the courtyard. The empty black holes where doors and windows had been still gaped solemnly.

Halfway to the stairs was the famous fountain and the princess statue. The fountain was an oval—roughly ten feet wide by twenty-five long.

The ornamental plantings and fish were long gone, of course. Instead there was about a foot of rainwater in the basin—fouled and made opaque by weeds and algae.

The statue itself was twisted askew on its base and one arm was broken off at the wrist showing the plaster which filled its metal shell. Holes had been broken in parts of the fancy coping which trimmed the fountain—evidently to look for traces of the gold.

Mike Shayne led the three heirs through the courtyard towards the stairway at the far end. This was the most dangerous part of the whole venture. An armed killer at one of the hotel windows might try to pick them off one by one. Shayne made them stick close to the wall beneath the shelter of the second floor balcony.

They made it safely to the stairs and up to the second and then the third floor. Here the balconies ended and the stair went into the building, narrowed and rose past a series of landings faced at the rear by the elevator shaft, leading off at each side to corridors flanked by the hotel rooms.

On the third floor, Shayne motioned the others to get on the stairway and go up a few steps, where they would be out of sight from the balcony. He waited on the balcony, deep in the shadows against the wall. If all went as he expected, someone would be following them up the stairway from the courtyard.

The detective set himself to watch and listen. To be better concealed, he stepped just inside the door of the second room down to the left of the stairway.

It was absolutely the worst thing that he could have done.

The man he was waiting for had been waiting for him inside that same room — watching, them all come up the stairs and the three heirs go on into the stair well.

The only warning Mike Shayne had was the hiss of indrawn breath and the slight scrape of a shoe on the floor as the man behind him launched his attack.

For anyone else, it would not have been warning enough. But the detective was a veteran of hundreds of ambushes. He flattened against the wall which he faced and loosened his knees—starting to drop towards the floor.

As a result, the barrel of the automatic his assailant was using as a club struck the wall of the room instead of Shayne's head. The blow was hard enough to gouge plaster from the wall and knock the pistol out of the man's hand and leave him with a near-paralyzed wrist.

In spite of that, he was able to grab Shayne in a rear overarm body hold and haul him to an erect position.

Shayne kicked back with his left foot and felt the heel hit against the man's shin. The pain distracted him further as the red-head shoved himself violently

away from the wall. The man yelled and tried to tighten his grip.

Mike Shayne raised his own shoulder high and at the same time lowered his body by bending his knees. He turned his body slightly to the right and drove an elbow forcefully into the man's body below the rib cage. That made the attacker release his grip.

The detective reached up with his right hand and, grabbed his attacker's upper right arm just above his elbow. He gripped the man's right wrist with his left hand and with a violent effort, threw him over his head. He heard his would-be killer hit the floor with a crash.

That would have been enough to finish off most opponents, but this one was both strong and a skilled fighter. He rolled away from the redhead and managed to get to his feet.

Even in the near-darkness of the room, Shayne could see the man pull a knife from a belt holster over his left hip. The weapon had a wicked six-inch blade and the wielder held it like a professional, with his thumb pointing along the top of the grip and the wicked point whipping up and out towards Mike Shayne's belly.

The detective's reaction was swift and skillful.

He crossed his arms at the wrist to make a V in which he caught the attacker's own wrist above the knife hand and, at the same time, sucked in his stomach

and jumped slightly to the rear to avoid the blow.

As soon as he stopped the thrust, Shayne grabbed the man's right hand with his own left and dug his thumb into the back of the hand. He quickly reinforced this hold by grabbing the wrist with his right hand and placing his left thumb on the back of the hand.

XII

WITH THAT GRIP he was able to twist the wrist and bend the hand towards the forearm. The man was off balance and in considerable pain. He dropped the knife.

Shayne twisted the man's arm and kicked his feet out from under him. He was able to twist the man's arms, keeping him helpless, then let go and clout him with a short chop to the jaw.

The fellow fell backwards through the door of the room and out onto the balcony.

There was the sound of a shot from a small caliber automatic pistol and then the thunk of the bullet hitting flesh.

Shayne got through the door just in time to see Sally Jeffers grab at Rod's arm as he touched off a second shot at the dark body on the balcony floor. This bullet chipped concrete from the floor.

Shayne swung a long, looping right to the jaw which knocked Rod Jeffers to the floor, unconscious.

Then he yanked the walkie-talkie out of his jacket pocket and called Lucy Hamilton, who had been waiting a block away with an ambulance. She in turn used her car phone to call the nearest Miami police patrol car. The men in the black and white arrived on the heels of the ambulance attendants.

By that time, Rod was recovering, but the gun he had used was safely in Shayne's pocket.

"What in the hell was the meaning of that?" the contractor demanded of Mike Shayne. "I was just trying to keep him from killing you."

"He wasn't about to kill me," Shayne said. "I'll explain everything shortly, but first there are a few other things to take care of."

The wounded man was temporarily bandaged and put on the stretcher. The bullet had glanced off his rib cage and gone through his side, apparently without hitting a lung or any other vital organ. He was groaning and in considerable pain. One of the men from the patrol car would ride in the ambulance with him to the prison ward at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

"I want him held," Shayne told the policeman. "I'll be by the Station to swear out a warrant. For charges, we can try attempted assault with a deadly weapon and suspicion of Murder One to begin with, and tell them to interrogate him fully. I'll give them my story

when I come in."

The man was carried away on the stretcher.

"Now you've got the killer," Rod Jeffers said positively.

"I don't want to be a spoilsport," Wendy said, "but is it as simple as that? Who is he? How did he get in the picture? Why was he trying to kill us? I need answers."

"I think I can give them to you, Wendy," Shayne said. "Of course that lad is going to sing like a canary before they get through with him, but it isn't too hard to figure out what he's going to say."

"I didn't want anybody killed," Sally Jeffers broke in. Her face was white and strained. "Please, Mike. Remember what we —"

"Later," Shayne said. "First of all, I want to finish this job. The whole thing is about gold, and I want to show you that gold. Then the explanations."

"You really know where the gold is?" Rod Jeffers sounded incredulous.

"I think so," Shayne replied. "Let's go and see."

He led them down the stairs to the courtyard, then over to the fountain and pool where the Little Princess had stood for so many years.

There, he reached for the prybar, which Wendy had been carrying.

"I've spent a lot of time trying to go back into Old Tom Jeffers' mind today," the redhead said.

"He was a cute old fellow and everything pointed the same way. He would do his best to outsmart the people he knew would try to find his gold. He wouldn't just dump it in the walls.

"That would be too hard for even him to recover—and remember he might have planned to do just that but died before he needed the money. Instead he'd stick it right out like Poe in the *Purloined Letter*. He'd get a big laugh out of taunting the world—and his heirs.

"Of course, you all thought of the statue. It was the obvious place as Tom reckoned it to be. It was wrong. You broke into the decorative parts of the fountain. No gold."

"For God's sake, get to the point, man," Rod broke in.

"There's just one more spot here" Shayne said. "It's right under your eyes but you don't see it. Too simple. I didn't see it either till I found out the old pirate probably brought in the gold in bars or bricks."

Wendy jumped up and clapped her hands. "The floor of the fountain, Uncle Mike!" she cried. "The brick floor!"

"Exactly." Shayne nodded. "A brick floor covered with waterproof paint. When they drained and cleaned the pool they put on another coat of paint till there must be fifty layers. The rest of the time, nobody sees the floor. The flowers and the weeds and the

pretty fish is all they really see."

He took the powerful flashlight and the pry-bar and reached over into the pool. The first brick he found under the paint was just that—a brick. So was the second.

He moved a few feet and tried again. This time the flashlight beam showed the gleam of yellow gold.

"There it is," Mike Shayne said. "There's the gold you've all wanted."

He heard them suck in their breaths.

"Right under our nose!" Wendy said. "All these years."

"I even broke into a spot down at the other end," Rod said. "When I just hit brick, I forgot about it."

"I think the gold bricks are set in a random pattern among the others," Shayne said. "There's hundreds of bricks in that flooring and not many of them have to be gold to add up to a fortune. To hit the right one takes pure luck or what you'll have to do next—that is, tear them *all* up. Anyway, I found your gold for you. That's half my job. The other half is find the killer."

"You just did that job," Rod Jeffers said.

"I just did half that job," Mike Shayne said. "The man the cops just took away probably killed your cousin Bill. When they find his truck, the police labs will establish that. He did some other things, too, but he was acting as an agent

when he did them."

"Who was he and what do you mean?" Wendy asked.

"If you had a better look at him in the dark and confusion, you'd have recognized him as the man with the club who was chasing you last night. I didn't think so then, but he probably wanted to kill you.

"His name is Cecil Burke and he signed onto Rod's demolition crew right after the job started. He knew about the job and the gold, so he made love to Sally here to cut himself in. It was his apartment she met me at earlier today. He tried to run me down like he did Bill Jeffers later when I left."

"I didn't know about that," Sally said. "I swear to God, Mike."

"I think you're telling the truth," Shayne said. "Later, Burke killed Bill. Then he cut your brake lines. After you met me, he didn't trust you any more. Besides he had bigger fish to fry."

"He knew we were coming here tonight because one of you told him, so he came ahead and set an ambush. I think he wanted us to lead him to the gold, but I blundered into the room where he was hiding and triggered off a premature attack. He'll tell the police."

"What about the rifle shot and the pistol attack on you and Sally?" Wendy said.

"Those weren't Burke," Shayne replied. "There were other loose ends, too. They both-

ered me. Right up to the end, this was far too confused to be the work of one man—particularly an outsider like him. One of you *had* to be in it, too."

"Which one, Uncle Mike?"

"That's what bothered me right up to the last minute. At first, I thought it had to be Sally, but then he tried to kill her, too.

"Then I remembered something Sally had said—that Rod could afford to have his killing done for him. It fitted, but I still hadn't any proof. At least, I didn't until Rod tried to kill Burke just now. There had to be a reason he wanted the man dead.

"I have the pistol he used. Small caliber. I think the ballistics people will show it matches the slugs fired into Sally's house to scare us. Just like the rifle shot was supposed to scare you and me last night.

"Rod needed the money, so he hired Burke. Burke tried to doublecross him—first with Sally, then on his own. Now the police have him and he'll talk because Rod shot him."

Sally said, "Oh my God!"

Wendy said nothing.

Rod said, "I'm going to call my attorney."

"I think that's a fine idea," Shayne told him. "While you're doing it, I'll arrange for a police guard on this fountain and take you girls and Lucy out for a drink."

The Sniper



by R.C. PYEATTE

Tanner had never cheated on his wife until he met Sheila. And the way things turned out, it was a safe bet he would never cheat again.

THE FIRST SHOT struck the steel thermos bottle sitting on the flat rock between the man and the woman and sent it spinning into the air, slinging liquid in an arc

before it fell to the grainy earth between the two larger rocks that formed the legs of their makeshift table.

The bullet, moving at hundreds

of feet per second, took the sturdy bottle high and just a little to one side, punching through it before the sharp crack of the shot reached the ears of the two sitting on either side of it.

For a second they were frozen, staring down at the thermos. Then the man reacted first, throwing himself flat behind one of the larger rocks. At his choked command, the woman dropped slowly behind the other rock three feet away, her hazel eyes wide with the beginnings of shock and fear.

In that instant, the clock turned back twenty-five years for Hobard D. Tanner and he was once more in the valleys and hills of Korea, hearing the pop of rifle fire and the fine-edged hum of a slug whispering past with its portent of pain and death.

He lay flat on the ground, clutching the earth and staring to his left at the thermos that was still dribbling coffee into the sandy soil of the tiny island. His heart was thudding and the tart taste of fear had dried his mouth as he looked at the hole in the bright metal container. His immediate reaction had been that of a soldier rather than an executive of an aviation electronics firm — but then, as an executive and a civilian, no one had ever taken a shot at him.

His heart began to slow and breath came a little easier as

reason began to take over. After all, he didn't know that the shot had been *at* them, even though it *had* hit the thermos. More likely, it was a stray from a hunter practicing up in the canyon beyond them, even though they hadn't heard any shooting until that moment. Nevertheless, he peered cautiously around the side of the rock before he came to his knees and called out.

"Hey — hey there! We're down here. Watch the shooting!"

There was no answer as the echo of his shout died away.

At one-thousand-and-twenty yards each second, a rifle bullet can cover a two-hundred yard distance in a bit less than two-tenths of one second — faster than the sound that follows it — giving some truth to the old soldiers' understanding that you never hear the one that gets you.

It takes six-tenths of one second to die in a head-on collision at the current legal speed limit. But it takes hardly one third of one brief second for a less-than-finger-sized projectile, leaving the barrel of a high-powered rifle, to span twice the distance of a football field and drill a one-half-milimeter hole in a target. Or a metal thermos. Or, depending upon the skill and the desire of the marksman, a human skull.

"Why don't they answer?" the girl asked, voicing his own apprehension at the silence.

"Maybe they didn't hear you. Try again. *Please!*"

At the "Please," he glanced quickly at her. It occurred to him then that, in their months-long relationship, he had never heard her use the word.

He opened his mouth and called, "*Hey...*" but he let the rest of the sentence fade away unfinished. There was something about the quiet of the canyon, heretofore only calm, that had now become ominous. He settled back on his haunches, chewing the inside of his lip in a thoughtful manner.

Six seconds later, the second shot splattered dirt two feet to his right, sending a twig spinning away. Five seconds after that, the sound of a third short rippled in the dry desert air.

"Oh, *no...*!" the girl sobbed.

He wanted to tell her to be quiet, but he couldn't speak as he lay there, fingers digging into the ground behind the rock.

The canyon they were in was actually three — formed like a giant chicken track, the three front toes making deep tributaries and the hind toe tapering away behind the small three- and brush-covered island they were on.

Fifty yards beyond the island, the now dry river bed dipped underground, carved by the water in its rush from the sharp-edged purple and gray mountains to the east. The island was nearly

eighty yards long and twenty-five yards at its widest point, with half a dozen old cottonwoods at the far end.

He looked back over his shoulder at the maroon Lincoln Continental they had come in, parked 60 yards away, in the step rutted trail that was the entrance to the canyon. The trail entered the canyon at a point midway to the island, just where the trees began, leading straight into the sandy riverbed.

The car now slumped to its left, a front tire punctured by a bullet. Abstractedly, he remembered that the radial tires cost \$95 apiece and that angered him.

Again he peeked around the rock, trying to determine where the shots had come from. There was no doubt now that the shots were directed at them. It was not just some careless hunter, but someone who was trying to kill them.

Why, he asked silently, would anyone want to kill them? No, maybe not kill them. With that kind of accuracy, if the shooter had wanted to kill them, he could have done so before. Easily.

Tanner swept his eyes along the walls and the rim of the canyon in front of them. If he were a sniper, he asked himself, where would he set up in order to command a good field of fire over the whole area?

There, he decided, straight ahead on the promontory formed by the first and second toes of the

chicken track. There was a small cave — no more than a hole in the wall — five feet below the rim and just big enough for a man to crawl into. Even with a back way into the cave, it would take a lot of effort to get into that position. But why would anyone want to?

From the hole to where they were, he estimated, was a good 200 yards at least, maybe another 50 to the car. Even without telescopic sights, a good rifleman could possibly bring them down before they reached the car — and he had to assume that the marksman up there did have a 'scope.

He was thinking again like a platoon commander in Korea, and he suddenly wanted a rifle in his hands. In any case, civilian or military, they were pinned down by some sharpshooting nut, with no means of escape and little cover.

He looked at the girl, scrunched down behind the other rock, and became aware of her sobbing. There was dirt on the hem of her lime-green sunback dress. One of her sandals had come off and was lying between the two rocks that sheltered them.

As if the malevolent eye of the sniper had followed Tanner's the shoe leaped away, its sole perforated by a bullet.

The girl, Sheila, began to scream, her voice rising hysterically.

"Shut up!" he snarled. "Stop



it! That's probably just what he wants. He probably gets his kicks frightening people."

She looked at him, her eyes dull with fear, but her shrieks attenuated to whimpering gasps.

He regretted his brief flare of anger at the girl, but it had momentarily blotted out his own fear, giving him time to think. But all he could think about was their reason for being on that tiny spit of brush and sand, miles from anywhere.

Sheila Lynn Freeman had been with the company — Aviatronics — for less than a week when Tanner first noted her long, champagne-

blonde hair, her lithe figure and flirty hazel eyes with their long sooty lashes. And the walk. Twenty-six years old, lively and self-assured in the way that only a young and attractive girl who knows she is young and attractive can be.

She affected a finishing-school accent, but there was just enough rawness under the Bryn Mawr tones to show that she was a poor girl working her way up. The men ogled and the girls hissed inaudibly when Sheila was around, but it didn't seem to bother her at all.

Bob Dabney, the president, had hired her as his secretary and, although he, sometimes joked mildly about his new secretary, he did stress that he was far too married, as were most of the men in the office, to even think of starting an office romance.

The remarks were in the nature of a hint, spoken at an executive meeting, and Tanner took the hint, but it was sometimes an effort not to watch the girl as she moved through the office on one errand or another. He, too, was married, and besides, in twelve years with Aviatronics, he had never panted after office girls.

That was one of the reasons that what he did surprised him as much as it did — he asked her for a date.

She had come into his office with a proposed layout for the new instrument for a Lear Jet, and he

was suddenly unable simply to note his suggestions, if any, and dismiss her. He kept her waiting around until she had relaxed enough for small talk.

He found that she was going with a professional basketball player and that she lived in a large, east-side apartment complex with two other girls. She was a little vague as to her family background and still more vague as to where she came from, but Tanner let these points pass as unimportant. What he really wanted to know was — could he see her after work for a drink?

After only the slightest hesitation, she agreed. She smiled, picked up the layout and the memo he had hastily scrawled and left his office, giving him another smile as she closed the door behind her.

He sat quietly for several minutes after she left, just staring out of his office window, awed by the impulse that had made him ask her for a date.

"I've just made a date with a pretty girl nearly half my age," he said softly to himself, a little shaken by the realization.

Out of all the men in the office, married or not, why had she accepted a date with him? Married, with thinning brown hair just beginning to gray, his tall, wiry frame softened by too many years at a desk, his bright, blue eyes hidden behind heavy-framed glasses.

Too reserved and too aware of life's ironies to be the sort of man to sweep a girl off her feet, he wondered at her acceptance. He had no advantage to offer, no promotion, no townhouse apartment, no trips to Europe, just the sudden unplanned request for a date that surprised him more than it did her.

At all the conventions, all the office parties and the rare times the company had asked him to travel, there hadn't been any affairs or even any brief involvements with women, professional or otherwise. He was married and that was that.

But this time it was different. Why it was, he couldn't say. Perhaps it was his age — 44 — or 15 years of untraumatic, quiet married life. Or perhaps it was a sort of curiosity that had subtly grown in the last few years. Curiosity, he affirmed, and a restlessness that had begun sometime ago when marriage had become a predictable, almost routine thing as marriages often do.

Perhaps it was then, at some indefinable point, that the girls out in the street and in the offices in their light summery dresses and clingy slacks had begun to look too ripe and too firm and too far out of reach for a middle-aged, childless, no-longer-rising businessman.

He shook his head in self-reproach, but he found that just

thinking about having an after-work drink with a young and very attractive girl made his heart beat a little faster and his senses sharper.

He told himself it was curiosity and that was all it could be — for both of them. The girl was pretty and obviously using her looks to advance herself, but that was something he felt was more natural than conniving. Anyway, just this one time, he, Bard Tanner, was going to have one quiet fling and possibly taste one of those inaccessible visions before sliding back into the hair-curlers-to-bed, Saturday-night-at-the-TV-limbo of middle-aged marriage.

Just this once, he was going to indulge himself in something a lot of men considered an office perk or a matter of course at a convention, like the limp string beans and the dry roast beef.

That first, casual after-work drink was strictly proper. Almost. There were no sly touches, no innuendos, no double entendres, no complaints of wifely neglect. There was, though, a certain pleasurable tension between them. On the surface, it was simply a company officer buying a drink or two for a diligent employee, but the tension was there, heightening the responses, playing a stimulating counterpoint to the pleasant, ordinary conversation.

That meeting, because it was

pleasant and exciting, became two, then three, then the half-challenging, "Why don't we?" that led to a downtown motel, beginning the affair in earnest.

Motels were too risky, too-frequent out-of-town trips were just asking for trouble by increasing the chances of casual — or not so casual — discovery. So they planned a picnic, just the two of them, when his wife was away for the day. Nervously, they made jokes about ants and cockleburrs, but the idea was appealing.

Late September in southern Arizona generally marks the end of the local rainy season — the Monsoons the natives call them — which begin around mid-July and last until late August or early September.

These rains come suddenly, usually in the late afternoon, and afterwards, when the rains have dried up, the ordinarily juiceless desert springs with new, green life. Clumps of mesquite and Palo Verde suddenly take on a richer tone and tiny, bright blossoms and clover-like grasses appear between them, scenting the air.

Parking, picnicking, even driving through the arroyos and canyons during this season of the rains is ill-advised. The run-off from higher ground can send a wall of water raging down these normally dry wadis with sufficient force to carry a car away, drowning its unfortunate occupants. Any sign of the swollen cumulonimbus

gathering over the ragged mountains is enough to send native Arizonans scurrying out of places such as the one currently occupied by Sheila and Bard on this warm September Saturday.

Until that first shot, it had been a very nice picnic.

Now, as he looked at his watch and then above the rim of the three-pronged canyon, Tanner noticed a darkening in the east over the saw-edged Catalinas. This time of year, it was even chances that a cloudburst was brewing.

He prayed that if what he saw was indeed a late seasonal rain-storm, that it would hold off until sunset dimmed the light in the canyon, making shooting more difficult. It was four-thirty — almost two hours until sunset.

A run for it now, before the light was too faint for good shooting, might tempt the sniper into a killing shot — that was if he didn't intend to kill them sooner. So far, he had merely teased them, but he had made it plain by example that he could kill by the simple expedient of changing his sight-picture the next time one of them became careless. Tanner crawled closer to the rock.

He looked at Sheila again. Her sobbing had puddled down to a few sniffles. He hissed at her to gain her attention.

"I don't think he can move out of that cave up there, so he can't come up behind us. That means, if

we keep down behind these rocks, we'll be okay."

She looked at him blankly without answering.

"Does your boy — ex-boyfriend know anything about guns? I mean, can he shoot pretty well?"

"What? I...don't know. Anyway, what makes you so sure it's Ben up there?"

Until that moment, he hadn't given any serious thought as to who might be up in the cave. He had assumed it was some nut, some ugly-minded gunslinger who just happened to be — just happened to be? — in a small cave, in a canyon miles from town, just waiting for someone to come along so he could terrify them? No way!

The gunner had selected his cover with infinite care — taking up a good position, getting the range click by click and cinching down the sling. Tanner felt the churning fear in his stomach again.

The girl was saying, "Does your wife know about guns for that matter?"

"Not a thing!" he snapped. "She's scared of them."

Then some nasty imp, crouching in the back of his mind asked, 'But how mad could she get? What if she hired a shooter?'

Forget it! Reject that. She wouldn't be that devious. She'd simply hire a lawyer and go for a divorce...maybe.

But the imp said, 'What if she

went out and got a lover herself? What if she found out and decided it was getting-even time? And what if the lover were a trigger-puller?'

Reject that! She wouldn't do that. She's too gentle.

And the imp said, laughing: 'Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.'

Reject! It's just some screwball up there. Just some nut.

Imp: 'Yeah? Sure! Ol' Ben, the ex-lover is a pussycat and your wife wouldn't swat a biting gnat. So who's up there? Ever done anybody wrong, Tanner old man? Anybody at all?'

He remembered the court-martial. *Private...Private Duncan. Right. William Henry Duncan. That nasty little operation in Seoul with the government property and the bar girls. I had to turn him in. But he swore he'd get even. Did hard time in some military prison — a bad place to do a long stretch. Would he be out now? Is that Duncan up there?*

The next shot whanged off of the rock in front of the girl and ricocheted away down the canyon, the sound of the shot bouncing off the steep walls.

Tanner flinched and tried to make himself smaller behind the rock, then suddenly he felt anger.

He's making me cringe! He's sitting up there enjoying it!

"I can't stand any more of this!" The girl quickly sat up and jerked off her remaining sandal.

"I'm getting out of here. Now!"

She got to her knees, then to her feet and took two cautious steps beyond her sheltering rock, fists clenched and back rigid. On her fourth step, a shot ripped out, the slug slapping into the ground two feet in front of her stockinged feet. She broke, started to turn back, then fell, face down.

For one horrifying second, Tanner thought she'd been hit and his first thought was, *How can I explain her body?*

Immediately, he hated himself for the thought and the relief he felt was tinged with guilt as he saw no wound on her and heard her gasps of inarticulate terror.

"Crawl over here," he commanded. "Move!"

"I can't," she moaned. "I can't move. I'm scared! Oh, God!"

He let out a breath of relief, then he heard her say, "*Damn you!*"

For a moment, he thought she meant the sniper until he saw that her eyes were on him.

"Get me out of here!" She spat the words in icy fury, glaring at him. "You and your stupid picnic! Do something, big man!"

He opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't think of anything to say, seeing the hard, searing anger on her face.

She buried her face in the dirt and he could see her shoulders shaking.

"Just crawl this way," he said, keeping his voice even, "Move

slowly and just think about getting behind the rock again. That's it. Easy does it..."

She began to crawl slowly toward the rock and Tanner held his breath, braced for the next and fatal shot. The shot didn't come and she reached the safety of the rock, where she sat curled in a tight ball, her back to him.

Then she began to curse in a low monotone. The language she employed would have impressed a Gunnery Sergeant, but after a time she ran out of breath and sat silent, her back still toward him.

Tanner felt suddenly very tired. He felt hollow and hopeless, drained by the combination of fear and anger. He checked the time again and saw that only twelve minutes had passed since the last time he had checked it. He looked above the rim at the gathering dark clouds, then shifted to place his back tighter against the rock and stared down at his feet.

At six-o'clock, the first few drops of rain began to fall, lightly at first, then thicker and heavier, splattering on the rocks that sheltered them. The rain-laden clouds had now moved overhead, hastening the darkness, but at the same time, bringing the threat of sudden flood rolling down the canyon.

He changed position, feeling the cramp in his legs, and looked toward the cave. Maybe the sniper had gone, tired of the game.

Within ten minutes, the canyon

was dim as the rain pounded down, drenching their hair and clothes. He waited five minutes more, anxiously scanning the canyon for any sign of rising water, then looking toward the car, gauging again how far they would have to run through the sand to get to it. Flat tire or not, he was going to drive the Lincoln out of there, get the girl back to her car and do his best to forget that any of this had ever happened!

Already on the steep trail, there were rivulets of water, carving new ruts and turning the clayish soil to a slick paste. If the car started to slide once they were in it, they could end up nose first, stuck in the soaked sand of the riverbed, helpless targets under the magnified eye of an expert marksman.

Their only real hope was to blast out of the trail as quickly as possible. Leaving the car was out of the question; there would be too many questions from the insurance company, not to mention the questions from his wife — questions he'd rather not have to try to answer. Now it was time to go. He picked up a small pebble and pitched it toward the girl's back.

"Hey!" she snapped.

"Get ready. We're going to make a run for it."

"No," she said stubbornly. "I'm not moving."

Patiently, he explained, trying to keep his voice just loud enough

for her to hear over the sound of the rain.

Finally he saw her nod. "All right, all right. I don't care what happens now, anyway."

The rain made at least partial cover as they sprinted for the trees at the end of the island. They turned right, slogging through the yards of clinging, wet sand towards the car.

It was the classic nightmare. You're running through something like warm tar and some hideous, but somehow indistinct, horror pursues on taloned feet, gaining with each step, until its hellish breath is blowing on your neck and the awful, wide jaws snap and slaver just behind you.

The damp sand sucked at their ankles and each step was a small victory, gained against the tight-muscled tingle between their shoulder blades, waiting for the smash of a bullet.

They reached the car, slipping and sliding as they pulled the doors open. Sheila lost her footing, banging her shoulder on the edge of the door as she went down. Tanner slid quickly across the seat and grabbed her arm, hauling her into the car. As he leaned over, there was a brittle snap and a neat hole, framed by spiderwebbed cracks, appeared in the driver's side window.

The engine caught instantly and Tanner shifted hard into reverse. He forced himself to feed the gas slowly and steadily until the car

began to move.

"My purse!" the girl screamed, "I forgot my purse!"

She started to open the door again, but Tanner jerked her back, ignoring her howl of protest. At that moment, any lingering affection or concern he may have had for Sheila Freeman was gone, evaporated in the heat of anger and disbelief.

Again, the car began to move backwards, crabbing sideways as the tires grabbed and slipped. It slid, fishtailing and wheels spinning, bumping first into one side of the defile and then the other. It would gain a few feet, then lose them, its track hampered by the flat tire and the slick surface.

It seemed a long, long time before they reached the top of the trail, but once there, Tanner felt like yelling in joy and relief. He turned the steering wheel hard, feeling the power steering fighting the pull of the flat tire, then accelerated as much as the soggy ground would allow.

They bumped and wallowed down the puddled desert road, occasionally skidding from side to side, until they reached the pavement.

Two miles down the hard-surfaced road, Tanner got out and jerked the spare out of the trunk, changing the ruined front tire in clumsy, numb-fingered haste. Five miles after that, the rain

was behind them and the road was nearly dry as they pulled into a service station. He ordered the tank filled by the obviously curious attendant, then went to the bathroom.

During the ride, neither one of them had spoken. He had looked at her once or twice, wanting to say something or to ask her what she knew that might explain the incident, but her grim expression forestalled any conversation and she ignored his glances.

In the rest room, he looked at himself in the cracked and water-spotted mirror. With his hair plastered to his head, the beginnings of a bald spot showing and his face lined and tired by the hours of tension and fear, he looked older than his years.

He stood for a long time, just staring into the glass as if memorizing the face of a stranger and trying to understand how that man had become involved in the unbelievable and jeopardous situation he had faced that afternoon. Some of the things he had seen in the Orient had affected him the same way and he found himself asking the same question: *Do people really live this way?*

When he returned to the car, Sheila was waiting. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her makeup reapplied, but her dress still clung to her in soggy folds. As she had before, she hugged the door in thin-lipped silence and she

remained that way until they reached her apartment building. He would rather have dropped her off at the supermarket parking lot where her car was parked, but the keys were in her purse, somewhere in the now flooded canyon.

As she started to get out of the car, she turned and looked at him for the first time since they escaped the canyon.

"Do you want to call the cops, or shall I do it?" Her voice was flat and edged with contempt and some of the slight hauteur had returned.

Tanner shook his head. "No. We got out alive and that's enough. I'll take care of the rest."

She nodded curtly, satisfied at that, then she got out. She turned back for a second and looked at him again coolly.

"Just get my purse back. That's all I want." She turned quickly and walked away without looking back.

"Well, Mr. Tanner, the guy wasn't a professional, I'd say. He was trying to be careful about leaving signs and he found a good spot, but I get the feeling he was an amateur. He's a shooter though."

Deputy Sergeant Truck Miller leaned back a little in his straight-backed wooden chair and nodded toward the steel thermos where it sat on the scarred wooden desk in the tiny garage-office behind the Miller home.

The deputy's thick, black hair

was combed straight back and his blue work shirt was open at the neck. He wore faded, straight-legged levis, scuffed cowboy boots and a heavy, saddle-stitched belt with a silver-and-turquoise buckle. His hair, along with his black eyes, slightly hooked nose and high cheekbones, testified to his Plains Indian ancestry, setting him apart from the thickset, flat-cheeked tribes native to the state.

He was a big man, in his late thirties, and trim for a man of his size. When he spoke, it was not in the grunting, monosyllabic speech of the B-Western Indians of movie fame, but in the wise, sometimes cynical parlance of the street cop. Hiring Deputy Miller had been one of several actions Bard Tanner had taken since the shooting incident in the canyon five weeks before.

It was not encouraged that members of the country sheriff's department do outside investigational work, but Miller had a wife and six children to support on the not awe-inspiring pay of a county employee, so the sheriff tended to look the other way now and again.

Tanner had invested no small sum in checking out former acquaintances, possible enemies, his own boss, just to be sure, and the U.S. Army records of one Pfc. William H. Duncan, now deceased.

A background check of Sheila Freeman was still ongoing, but none of the hired investigators

had so far turned up anything that might connect her with the shooting.

All that had surfaced to date was the fact that she was the illegitimate daughter of a minor official in Macon, Georgia, and that she had been cited, but not actually jailed, for shoplifting several months prior to her departure from that city. Nevertheless, the less information he received about Miss Freeman, the less comforted Tanner felt.

"He wasn't a professional hit man then?" Tanner asked.

"Hit man? No. Somebody might have hired him — no way to tell right now — but the idea was to scare you. At least it was until he put a round through your car window, so maybe he violated instructions. Anyway, it was amateur. If he'd been a pro — like you said, a hit man — he'd have just scared you or nailed both of you right up front without bothering to let you now it was coming."

Tanner shifted uncomfortably. "What else did you find out?"

"Not too much." He reached into a file cabinet next to the desk and came up with a metal ammunition box with a lock on it. Inside the watertight box was Sheila's purse, caked with mud, her shoes, her wallet and a brass cartridge case.

"I left the basket, cloth and other gear out there," Miller explained, "They were pretty messed up by the rain and mud, so

I figured you wouldn't want them any more, okay?"

Tanner nodded. "Is that one of the shell casings?"

"Yeah. Winchester two-forty-three. I wasn't able to turn any of the slugs. That one through your window must've gone out the open door on the other side. Anyhow, judging by where I found it, it's a good bet that this was what he was using. Good choice of ammo for what he was doing."

Tanner rubbed his damp palms on the legs of his trousers. "What kind of a rifle do you think he was using?" He asked the question more out of a need to say something than a desire to know.

Miller looked at him for a moment before replying.

"Hard to say. That's a popular caliber for varmints and even medium-sized game."

At the word "varmits", Tanner shifted uneasily again.

"As long as you asked and as long as I'm just guessing," Miller continued, "I'd say he used a bolt-action with a good 'scope on it. None of that short-barrel, fold-up spy junk you see on TV."

He stood up and went to the gun rack in the corner of the small office, lifted one of the weapons off the deerfoot racks, hefting it.

"I'd use something like this if I wasn't worrying about it being traced — and I don't think an amateur would. Weatherby Vanguard. Goes all the way up to three-hundred magnum. A real

shooter's rifle and not expensive for a Weatherby. Birthday present," he added, hefting it again proudly.

With its high comb, tapering fore-end and businesslike telescopic sight, the weapon had a look of lethal functional beauty.

Tanner wanted to shudder and, looking at it, felt for some reason, that the sniper had used one just like it.

"Anyway," Miller said, "your boy is a fair shooter. The range from where he was to where you were was closer to two hundred meters — two hundred and twenty yards — and, using a hundred-grain bullet with a custom load, it wouldn't drop a nit at that range. And he could probably hold a good, tight group in the black, too."

"By the way," the deputy went on, "from where he was, he could have put one through the top of your head anytime he wanted. Sure. Look at the angle."

He picked a pencil off the desk and threaded it into the hole in the thermos. "I took a sight from the cave to where you were and back and, believe me, he could've dropped either of you with no sweat, rock or no rock."

Tanner felt something sour rise in his throat.

"Look," Miller said, reading his expression, "you got off light. Except when he got excited and cranked one through the car,

he was out to warn you. Anyway you look at it, it puts me in an awkward spot, Mr. Tanner; what went down was assault, maybe even attempted murder, depending.

"It was ADW for sure, and that's good for one to ten at Florence. Maybe they'd go for a thirteen-two-forty-eight. If you don't mind me sounding like a movie cop, that's attempted murder. Guaranteed five years at the State motel. That yo-yo is gonna kill somebody one day."

Tanner bit his lip. "We still don't know *who* he is. And I *have* to keep it quiet."

Miller sighed, then shrugged. "Okay. Then I figure you, as a client, deserve all I can give you for the money and that includes educated guesswork. I wonder if maybe your — lady friend — has another friend that objects strongly to your seeing her. I found her driver's license in the purse, so I ran a check along with the name Ben you mentioned, and turned something that might help."

"Right now, anything would help."

"The 'Ben' is Ben Hopgood, a professional basketball player. Right now, Mr. Hopgood is resting comfortably in Saint Jo's Hospital with a busted leg, assorted knots and contusions, due to a little misunderstanding about the score of his last game. A fix was in and it

went sour, so Ben got bounced about some.

"No nasty Vegas or Detroit types, but just some ambitious local gentlemen who got scooped up for their trouble. And they are not very happy about it, you can believe. It isn't official yet, but snitches say that your friend was the bait used on Hopgood. The name she used was Linda Fredon."

"Oh my God!" Tanner said, holding his head in his hands.

"No one says you had anything to do with it, so relax. But just as a suggestion, I'd say stay far away from that woman." He tipped the contents of the purse out on the desk and poked one finger through the items there. There were some cosmetics, car keys, some change and a small notebook with a red cover, its pages damp and smeared.

"For my money," said Miller, "there's nothing more dangerous than an amateur crook. They goof a lot and we catch them, but someone often gets hurt — usually some fairly innocent bystander.

"Then there are those who like to hang around with the baddies. They think it's exciting and fun, but they usually end up as just another victim. They aren't mean enough or smart enough to be real sharp crooks, so the real baddies chew them up when the fun's over. I think your ex-girlfriend is one of those."

"I'm not seeing her anymore.

She quit the company she worked for, so we don't see each other."

Miller nodded slowly. "I looked at this notebook, by the way. It's in a kind of code, but it doesn't take a crypto-man to figure it out. It's mostly a diary of dates she had — names of local people she met...socially, so to speak. Could be embarrassing if some of it got out, but it's nothing criminal. Amateur blackmail stuff, but nothing we don't already know. Pretty dumb really."

"I wish I'd never met her! She must be some kind of nut!"

Miller nodded again sympathetically. "Forget it. Who asks for a pedigree? All of us get curious about foxy blondes now and then." He smiled. "Think over what I said, okay?"

Tanner took a deep breath and managed a smile in return, then stood and extended his hand.

"Thanks for the effort. And thanks for the advice, I'll take it. If it's all right, I'll take her things and send them back to her and try to forget I ever met her."

They shook hands and Miller watched from the garage door as Tanner pulled away from the house, following the tree-lined street that curved through the quiet, middle-class neighborhood.

As he drove away, Tanner offered a small prayer of thanks that the episode was over and that his wife hadn't found out. The affair had been stupid and tacky, born out of middle-aged anxiety

and boredom, but it was over and done. Oddly, he found himself wishing that he and his wife had been able to have children, or had adopted some.

He arrived home before his wife and went immediately to his den, where he wrapped Sheila's things in a brown paper parcel with a fictitious address on the return portion and took it to the post office, where it was weighed, stamped and placed in the mail sack.

His wife was home when he arrived the second time and he greeted her with more enthusiasm than usual, holding her tightly.

He mixed himself a drink and went into the living room, where he settled gratefully into his lounge. He turned on the television with the remote control to catch the five-o'clock news, just as the announcer was saying:

"...Arizona desert gives up those remains from time to time, victims of drug-related crimes or random acts of violence, often buried in shallow graves, unknown and unmarked. This latest victim has been identified as Sheila L. Freeman, twenty-six years old.

"Although no identification was found on or near the body, police were able to identify Miss Freeman through a missing-persons report filed by her roommate. Police Information Officer Bryan Nellis, stated that the cause of death was a gunshot from a high-powered rifle. Miss Freeman

was shot in the head."

Tanner sat stunned. They'd killed her. He thought of the package in the mail with his fingerprints on it, the report that Sergeant Miller would have to file now and what would all come out.

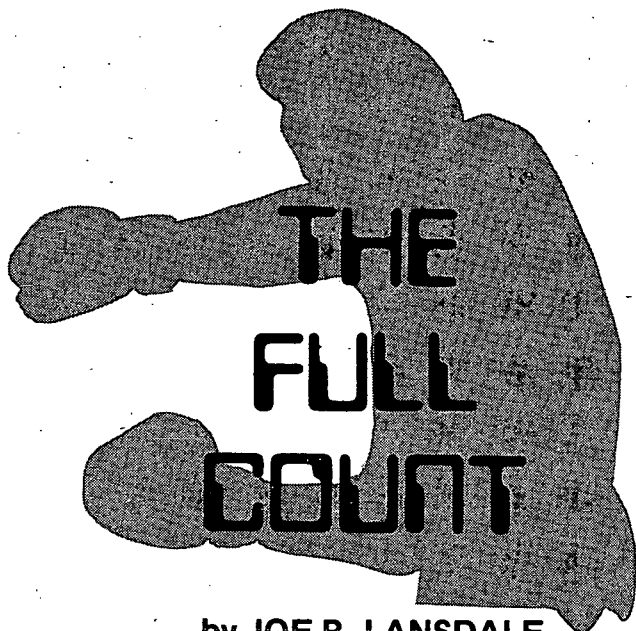
He got up and wandered into the dining room, trying to clear his mind of the image of Sheila dumped in the desert with a hole in her head.

The telephone rang four times before he answered it. He slowly brought the receiver to his ear, preparing himself for the voice of the police officer on the other end, requesting his presence.

But the voice was not that of a policeman, but a strange, soft voice he hadn't heard before, speaking almost conversationally.

"Mr. Tanner, I assume you heard the news. We're sorry about that of course, but you can understand. We need that little book. Our representative will contact you. Tomorrow noon, Mr. Tanner. No extensions. That's tomorrow at noon."

He set the receiver down gently. The voice had sounded like some sleazy bill-collector and, above the fear, he was angry. All he could do was hope the police got the sniper before noon the next day. Maybe they would. In the meantime, he would wonder numbly if what the old soldiers say is true — you never hear the one that has your name on it — the one that gets you.



by **JOE R. LANSDALE**

When Yank Callahan hired Slater to find the missing trainer for his prizefight gym, he was hoping against hope the fine old veteran was not dead. But Slater found out otherwise.

THE SCARRED FACE, bulky body, gnarled knuckles and go-to-hell look, seemed out of place with the green-and-yellow plaid sports coat, lavender slacks, white shoes and blue-and-grey striped tie the man was wearing.

He closed the door of his shiny, black Lincoln, put a nickle in the meter, and made his way up the hot mid-day sidewalk to a little bar with a sign overhead that read,

THE IDLE HOUR LOUNGE.

It was cool dark inside, just right for groping couples. Not many couples were there to grope at the moment, however. Just one old man who should have been with his wife and TV set, was putting the clutch on the plump thigh of a bleached blonde working girl about twenty years past her prime. Her plastic giggles were shrill enough to shatter a beer mug.

A couple of not-so-young, executive types with loose ties and tired eyes were sitting alone at booths looking as if they might break down and cry in their beer at any moment. A pot-bellied patron in a green leisure suit with more quarters than good sense or musical taste, was keeping the jukebox in business.

The bartender, a young blond man in a red-and-white pinstripe shirt with black elbow garters and a matching bow tie, was leaning over the bar with a rag dangling from his right hand and a look as distant as the Sahara in her eyes.

In the rear booth, Raymond Slater, private detective, was passing an idle hour with a lukewarm beer and a cigaret. It was almost time for the evening stampede and elbow war, coupled with the seemingly endless coinage of the music over, and Slater decided to break his routine a little early. He was finishing up his beer when the big man in the expensively mismatched outfit came in.

Slater wasn't the only one who noticed him. The ill-clad bruiser pushed his six-three, 240 pounds up to the bar and called for a beer. His voice sounded as if it had been fished from the bottom of a deep barrel.

He was interesting enough for the old man and the hooker to stop their play for a look. The two lonely executive types checked him out. Even Music Lover lost a few foot-pats over it.

The bartender brought him a beer, snapped up the change, fed the register and went back to his bar leaning. The old man and the hooker returned to the business at hand. The sad boys returned to the bottom of their beer glasses for comfort, and Music Lover clacked two more quarters.

Beer in hand, the man went directly to Slater's table and sat down across from the detective.

The muddled neon light was dim, but not so dim for Slater to get a look at the man's features. They looked as if they had been chiseled out of a coral reef. He had a flat nose, wadded ears and dark, liquid eyes that looked erie in the pulsating blue and white of the neon sign that blinked BEER. Later, in better light, Slater would see that the man's close-cropped black hair was peppered with grey.

"You Raymond Slater?" he asked?

"Uh-huh," Slater said cautiously, "You're...?"

"Yank Calahan, Ray," the bottom of the barrel voice said. "Call me Yank," He shoved a hand the size of a catcher's mitt as Slater. They pumped. Slater thought it was like shaking hands with a mechanic's vise.

"How do you know me?" Slater asked?

Yank drank the beer down almost in one slug, licked his lips. "Burn down at the cop-shop told me this is where I'd most likely

find you this time of day. Gave me a good description. Said you looked like a well dressed street fighter.

"Flattering!"

"You see, Slater, I checked with the cops in Gulf City and here in Pasadena about advising me on a private dick. When I found out that my old buddy Burn worked for the Pasadena bunch, I asked his advice and quit looking. We used to be pretty tight buddies, me and Burn. He told me this was a Monday through Friday routine with you. Want a beer?"

Slater said that he did. Yank turned and yelled over the wailings of the jukebox — no minor feat — at the bartender for two beers.

A skinny waitress who had just come on duty brought them over with an exaggerated wiggle and a smile that would have looked more at home in a beaver's mouth. Yank gave her a bill. She set the beers down, took his empty glass and went away, the wiggle still at work.

Slater drank some beer, got out another cigaret, offered Yank one. Yank declined. Slater lit up.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" Slater asked.

"I need you to find someone, Slater. My trainer, Jason Krim."

"Trainer?"

"Uh-huh. I'm a fight manager. Do a little promoting, too. Maybe you've heard of my man. Anibal Martinez."



Indeed Slater had. Martinez had been a nothing until recently. His surprise victory over the number-two contender for the crown had jumped his ratings by more than a few notches, and since he was a Pasadena, Texas, fighter, the papers had been chock full of it.

"I've heard of him," Slater

said. "Seen him fight on TV a couple of times. He's good. Probably got a good shot at the championship."

Yank nodded. "Real good chance. Listen, Slater, Burn told me you were the best private detective in Pasadena — Houston for that matter."

"Burn told you that?"

"Sure did. But I don't imagine he wants you to know. He doesn't like to let on he likes anybody."

"Doesn't do a bad job of it, either."

Yank laughed shortly. "That he don't." Then: "About the job, Slater?"

"I'm listening."

"You see, I got my own gym. It ain't much, but I'm proud of it. I used to fight some — hell, a lot. I didn't get this mug from tennis. Wasn't ever a number-one contender or nothing, but I was pretty good. I had the size and the strength, a little talent. I was good enough so that when I retired from the ring I got some training jobs. Trained some pretty good fighters. Remember Kit Miller, Miller the Killer? Ted Niven?"

Slater nodded. "I remember. They your boys?"

"Yep. I trained those pugs. Made some pretty good bread on account of it. Bought this gym in Gulf City. It ain't much, but it's paid for and I've lined up some pretty good local talent."

"One of them is Anibal Martin-ez."

"That's right. Anyway, I've done okay, and I got myself one fine trainer, Jason Krim."

"And Krim's missing?"

"Almost a week now. The police haven't found a single lead, least not anything that's helped."

"And you saw him last, when?"

"A week ago Tuesday."

"Krim ever do this before?"

"Plenty, but not for this long. That's why I waited a couple of days to report it. He's a pretty tempermental guy, very apt to do this sort of thing — and, to tell the truth, he and Anibal don't get along so good. Least not outside of the ring. That might have had something to do with it. When Jason feels pushed, he does funny stuff."

"Like walks out?"

"Uh-huh. Odd thing, though, is, when it comes to boxing, things are different. They respect each other there, least on how a fight is won. They've just got the kind of personalities that grate on one another."

"I don't think there's a trainer alive that can work with and get out of Anibal than Jason." Yank paused and drank the rest of his beer. "Yeah, he's done it before, but it's only three weeks before the fight, and there isn't any way in hell Jason would do anything to hurt the fight."

"You said that he and Anibal didn't get along very well. Wouldn't this be a good time for him to get even. Say they had an argu-

ment, and —”

Yank threw up a hand. “No way. Jason and Anibal can go at each other like starved rats, but there ain’t no way you could get Jason to hurt a fight. He may not like Anibal in ways, but the guy’s his handywork.

“It’s like a car in a way. You may not like the paint job, but if you tuned the engine it holds something special for you.” Yank gave Slater a stiff look. “What-ay-asay, Slater? Burn said that you could probably find him before they did on account of how busy they are.”

Slater was still thinking, humorlessly, about Yank’s car-tuning analogy. “All right, Yank,” he said. “I’ll find him. But I won’t guarantee he’ll come back. That’s his decision.”

Yank nodded. “That’s fair enough, Slater.” With that, he groped a huge wallet from his pocket and picked three hundreds from an ample collection of same. “This do for a retainer?”

Slater managed not to lick his lips. “Quite.”

“You can bill me for the rest,” Yank held out his hand. They shook and Slater got the address of Yank’s gym. After that, they went out into the glaring sunshine together.

“Tomorrow at nine,” Slater said.

“Right. Nine.”

Yank went to his sleek, black Lincoln and drove away. Slater got

into his red ’65 Chevy with the stuffing leaking out of the seats and drove home.

II

EARLY THE NEXT morning Slater showered, dressed, had a grease-and-egg sandwich and drove over to the address Yank had given him. He spotted the Lincoln right off. It looked conspicuous in this dreary neighborhood. He parked, got out, took a look at the gym. It appeared overdue for the wrecking ball. He lit a cigaret and went inside.

The interior was unexpectedly slick. All new equipment, all shiny to the eye. *Never judge a gym by its cover*, Slater thought.

There were Nautilus weight machines, speed bags, heavy bags, racks of jump ropes and lots of people scuttling about making shadow moves and noises like boxers. On a raised platform, between the ropes, a stylish boxer Slater recognized as Anibal Martinez, was slamming the hell, left and right, out of his puffing sparring partner.

No doubt about it the kid had the moves. There was champ written all over him. A half dozen men were gathered about the ring, hanging on the ropes, looking upward from chairs below. One of them was Yank. Slater went over and stood by him.

“Ain’t he somethin!” Yank said after shaking hands with Slater.

The big detective agreed that he was in fact something all right. A real hell of a boxer.

"That's enough." Yank yelled to Anibal, and the grateful sparing partner dropped his tired hands for a rest.

Anibal spit his mouthpiece into a gloved hand. A short man wearing a grey sweatshirt and sweat pants, slid through the ropes and untied his gloves, took off the head protector. That done he made his way over to the sparing partner. Anibal slid between the ropes, dropped down next to Slater and Yank.

"You the detective Yank hired to find Krim?" The boxer asked with just the slightest trace of a Mexican accent.

"That's me," Slater said.

"If I was you, I'd do my looking in the bars. Under some bar stool preferably."

"Something serious could have happened," Yank cut in. "For goodness sake..."

Anibal tossed Yank a cold stare. "Could be the best thing that ever happened to us," he said slowly. With that he went over to the speed bag and put his taped knuckles to work.

"Nice fellow," Slater said.

"Fool pride, Slater," Yank said. "He won't admit it, but without Jason he just ain't the same."

"Could have fooled me."

"I tell you, Slater, it's pride. The kids got a chip on his shoulder for some reason and Jason is his

prime target. Got some fool notion Jason's pushing him too fast."

"Is he?"

"No way. Won all his fights. He just can't stand the fact that he has depend on the man so much. Likes to think he can do it all by himself."

"He doesn't have him to depend on now."

Jason nodded. "And it shows."

"Yeah, he's all torn up."

"Just believe me, Slater. I know him."

"All right," Slater said, "you know him." With that he took the folded contract from his pocket. "Shall we fill this out, and then I've got a few questions."

"Let's go back to the office."

The office, unlike the interior of the gym, was not the Ritz. It was so small that the two big men were almost enough to overload the straining air conditioner.

When the contract was completed and Slater had folded it away in his coat pocket, he asked for a list of the people who worked with Jason. None of the names, other than Anibal and Yank, were familiar to him. He gave Slater a newspaper clipping with Anibal and Krim's picture. They were both smiling.

Krim was a fiftyish black man with a once-muscular body now coated with fat. Even in the picture he maintained a certain air of reserve and capability. Slater put the clipping in his pocket with the contract. Last, but not least,

Slater had Yank write out a list of Jason's hangouts. He could only think of three.

Yank and Slater shook hands, expressed hopes that Krim would be found soon and Slater left the office.

On the way out he stopped by the speed bag that Anibal was flogging. The bag thurped to a stop. Anibal looked at the burly detective with flat, brown eyes.

"Yank says you need Krim," Slater said, not trying to be the least bit cagy, watching carefully for the fighter's reaction.

"I don't need nothing but time. Krim don't give a damn about me and the feeling's mutual. He treats me like a side of beef. He only wants me to do well so he can pat his own goddamn self on the back. To hell with that! To hell with him!" Scowling, Anibal turned to the bag and slammed it a hard one.

"I don't need Krim," he snapped, looking back at Slater's impassive face.

"See you later," Slater said and moved away.

When he reached the door Anibal yelled, "If you find that sonofabitch, tell him not to come back. I don't need him. I don't want him."

Slater nodded in a disinterested way, pushed out the door. Behind him, even through the closed door, he could hear the speed bag. Anibal Martinez was going at it to kill.

He had driven two blocks when he decided that the late-model grey Plymouth was following him. Not too close. Not too far away. Just about right. Coincidence, maybe.

Slater took a few quick lefts, a right, then gassed it till he hit Pearl street. He eased up to a YIELD sign and waited.

He didn't see the Plymouth.

Deciding maybe that he was becoming paranoid in his old age — too much TV and Watergate — he chalked it up to stupidity. Feeling like a Junior G-Man, he drove the 25 miles from Gulf City to Pasadena and his office on Strawberry Street.

III

SLATER SAT IN his office, heels on desk, looking at the paint-peeling walls till four o'clock, then locked up and drove back to Gulf City and one of Jason's hangouts, Happy's Good Time Bar.

Happy's was an ugly building with more beer and wine advertisements splattered on the outside than the offwhite paint that showed between them. Red neon curlicue writing in a large, dirty window announced that there was live entertainment inside. Strippers.

Inside, it was the usual seedy little honkytonk with sticky tables, an unpolished bar, rows of bottles, a beer tap, a huge mirror that

looked as if someone had deliberately wiped it with a greasy rag — and a small stage for the strippers.

The place stank of stale cigaret smoke and alcohol.

Behind the bar was a bored bartender with black curly hair, a lantern jaw and eyes like a lynx. It was too early for the strip show, and only one die-hard drunk was present. He sat at the table in the back, contemplating the empty glass before him.

Slater went up to the bar, perched on a stool and ordered a beer. The bored bartender squeezed one out of the tap and slammed it down hard enough for some to slosh out on Slater's hand. The bartender saw it happen, but if it bothered him he didn't let on.

Slater showed him his grillwork. "You look kind of bored, Curly. Maybe you'd like to talk."

He gave Slater a sour look. "The name's not Curly and talk from drunks I don't need. It's that that makes me bored."

Touchy, Slater thought. He showed him the nice smile again. "I haven't even had a beer yet, so how come I'm a drunk. Maybe I could even salt up the conversation some." Slater took out his wallet, removed a one, put it on the counter.

The bartender gave it the experienced eye. "Nothing but the big time, huh, Charlie?"

Slater pursed his lips, took a fin from his wallet, put it with the single, kept his fingers on them,

but just lightly. "Nice job you got here," Slater said. Bet you even make some money. But not off the joint."

He gave Slater a sigh and a smile. Neither was exactly first rate. "Something I can do for you, Charlie?"

Slater took his fingers off the bills and watched the bartender palm them with the professional ease of a sleight of hand artist. The bills disappeared into his shirt pocket. He looked at Slater out of the corner of his eye.

He said, "You just giving them away or have you got questions?"

Slater drank some of his beer. It was bad enough to spit out, but the big detective restrained himself. "I've got questions," Slater said, a bit tired of the cat and mouse. "Ever hear of a guy named Jason Krim?"

The bartender lifted his eye brows, wiggled his mouth from side to side, said, "Nope. Sorry."

For six bucks you didn't give the question a whole lot of thought."

"Don't know any Jason Krim. It's as simple as that."

"Maybe I can refresh your memory. He's been in here quite a lot. Trains fighters, Anibal Martinez in particular. Krim's a big, black guy about fifty. Here."

"Slater got the clipping out of his pocket and laid it on the bar.

The bartender picked up a glass and a rag, made like he was polishing the glass, looked down at the clipping.

"Maybe I've seen him," he said.

Slater let out a sigh. "Either you've seen him or you haven't. Which is it?"

Very carefully, as if it were fine china, the bartender set down the glass, put the rag away beneath the counter, kept his left hand there. "You a cop or something?"

"Private investigator. I'm looking for Krim," Slater said, all the while watching the hidden hand. "How about it? you seen him?"

The bartender brought his hand from beneath the counter. It was empty. He picked up the clipping and looked at it. "Okay. Yeah, I've seen him. Used to come in here a couple of times a week, drink himself bananas and watch the strip show."

"You told the cops about this?"

"Now why should I do that?"

"Surely they've been around asking. He's on the missing persons list."

"Not to me, they haven't. Cops I don't need, Charlie. Look, I'm telling you, I used to see the guy a couple of times a week. Last time was a week ago, a Tuesday night, and that's the truth." He held up his hand. Slater had the feeling that if a stack of bibles had been available, he would have sworn an oath on them.

"Seem awful nervous about cops. Wouldn't be running some kind of action out of this joint, would you?"

"I just work here. As far as I know the joint's as straight as Robin's arrow."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm not kiddin'. Anything that goes on illegal here, I don't know nothing about it."

"Sure, the joint's a regular Sunday school." Slater looked at the bartender hard enough to crack an ice block. "Okay, preacher, wouldn't be more you'd want to tell me about this Krim fellow?"

"Okay now, don't get sore. It's just that chatty bartenders don't do an establishment any good. Weather and dames is one thing but..."

"I get the picture." Slater picked another five from his wallet, handed it to the bartender. It went, quickly, into the shirt pocket with the other bills.

He licked his lips, leaned over the bar, said to Slater in an almost whisper, "This Krim fellow is a regular. Like I said, a couple of times a week."

"That line's starting to sound like an echo."

"Just listen. He sits over there." Slater turned to look where he was pointing. A corner table next to the stage. "He drinks like a fish and watches the strip show. Passes a lot of bills around to the girls."

"The last time you saw him — leave with anybody?"

The bartender put an elbow on the bar, leaned close to Slater. "Just between you, me and the

wall, I did see him leave with someone, more or less."

"How do you leave with someone more or less?"

"This Mexican, the one here in the picture, came in and did some yelling at the old guy, finally jerks up the old dude by the shirt."

"What were they yelling?"

The bartender threw up his hands. "What am I, a tape recorder? This place was crowded and noisy. Ain't nothing worse than a bunch of noisy drunks."

"So what else happens?"

"Nothing. I go out back and empty the garbage, bottles and stuff. Out back I see the Mexican putting the old man in the back seat of a Lincoln. Can you believe that? The greaser's got a god-damned Lincoln! I drive a sixty-eight Ford. Well, anyway, the old man's as drunk as Cooter Brown, I reckon. The Mex puts him in the back, gets behind the wheel and drives off."

"Anyone with the driver?"

"Might have been. Wasn't paying that close attention."

"I guess you see that sort of thing every day? Often enough not to bother with calling the police."

"You see everything here after a while."

"Customers make a habit of parking out back?"

"They park anywhere the tires will set."

"Think the Mexican could have clouted the old guy?"

"Could have. A passed-out drunk and a punched-out one look a whole hell of a lot alike. If you know what I mean."

"The old man talk to anyone else that night?"

"Hell, I don't remember. I mean I wasn't keeping tabs on the guy."

"Give it some real deep thought. I mean, I could have the cops start checking around."

"Okay, okay, don't start with the cop talk. He did talk to Leona Blue some. She's a stripper here."

"Blue her real name?"

"No. Stage. I don't know what her real name is. What's it matter?"

"Maybe it doesn't. She here now?"

"No. Comes on at six-thirty, has her act at seven."

"Thanks."

The bartender didn't tell Slater he was welcome. The detective left Happy's and went to the other two places on his list. There was someone at both who had seen Jason, but not after Monday. It looked like Happy's was the last spot before his vanishing act.

Slater made a phone call to Yank, and in as casual a manner as possible, confirmed that Anibal sometimes drove his Lincoln, and that it was quite possible that he drove it the night in question. With that information in tow, Slater ended the conversation by telling Yank not to worry and that things were shaping up.

At six-thirty he drove back to Happy's.

IV

LEONA BLUE WAS not a movie queen, but she certainly had sex appeal. She was voluptuously built, and her costume, if you can call a G-string and a handful of sequins and gauze a costume, did nothing to conceal the fact.

She had nice things to go with the body — shoulder-length brown hair, beautiful smoky blue eyes and a quick smile that showed just the slightest trace of wrinkles at the corners. Slater quickly deduced that she wasn't old, but she was certainly not as young as she appeared at first glance.

After he made it clear that he wasn't a cop or one of the local lechers, Leona agreed to talk to him. She pulled a man's shirt over her "outfit", and sat with Slater at the table the bartender had said was Jason's usual spot.

After taking in the view for a period that Slater felt was just within being polite, he said, "How long have you known Jason?"

"Almost a year," she said. Her voice was soft and musical, the sort that could whisper sweet passion in the dark.

"Last saw him when?"

Her full lips quivered slightly. She leaned forward and said in a low voice. "He's not in some kind of trouble, is he?"

"None that I know of," Slater said. "I'm a private detective. His

employer, Yank, hired to find him. He's a little worried, that's all."

Leona nodded, bobbed her brown hair in a manner Slater thought was sensual. "I know about Yank. Jason speaks highly of him." She picked a pack of cigarets out of her shirt pocket, shook one out. Slater took out his lighter and lit it for her, lit one of his own.

"To tell the truth," she said, "I'm a little worried myself."

"That right?"

"Uh-huh. He's done this sort of thing before, going off for awhile without letting anyone know — but somehow, I'm really worried this time. I've called his place and even went by. Nothing. Locked, and the landlady claims she hasn't seen him. Not that she'd care to help anyway."

"I take it you and Jason are better than friends."

She rested her elbow on the table top, her head in her palm. The cigaret drooped languidly from her fingers, soft, grey ash floated down across the table.

"That's right," she said. "Much better than friends. I suppose you don't approve?"

Slater shrugged his shoulders. "Why should I approve or disapprove. What's it to *you*, anyway? It's your business, not mine."

She lifted her head from her palm, stretched both arms out on the table top. "Sorry. I get to hear so many lectures about how nice,

white girls ought not to run around with the niggers, I'm a little touchy. Bitter, too, I guess."

"You won't be hearing that from me."

"I can believe that," she said. "I'm just a little touchy, that's all."

"I can see how you would be. Gulf City isn't exactly the culture spot of the world, and the work you do doesn't cater to the upper crust. No offense intended."

"Nor your work."

"Touche. Right you are, present company excluded, of course."

They laughed, then Leona became solemn. She said, "Do you think Jason's all right?"

"I don't know what to think," Slater said truthfully. "From the way you talk, I take it no policeman have been around to ask you questions."

She wrinkled up her pretty face with concern. "Police? I thought you said he wasn't in any kind of trouble."

"I did. The police have a missing persons report on him. Yank hired me as insurance."

"No police," she said. "I haven't talked to any cops and the only cops I know are the two that show up here regularly for their payoffs. They must have a racket with half the dives in this area and no telling what else."

"Prostitution?"

"No. Drugs is my suspicion, and it's just that, a suspicion. I think James, that's the bartender,

and the owner deal a lot of stuff from this joint. The cops are in on it. Just guessing, mind you, but when you've been around these places enough, you get to be a pretty good guesser. As it is, I just keep my mouth shut." She took a hard look at Slater. "Do you think you can find him?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't be looking, Slater said, and for a rare moment his rugged face looked almost soft and vulnerable."

Leona blew smoke out with a sigh. "You know," she began, and she didn't really seem to be talking to Slater in particular, just addressing gentle memories, "Jason's a very special kind of guy. Tough; but gentle. That means something to me. I don't go for the old fashioned make-it or break-it kind of guy."

"You know what he likes to do?" She smiled briefly. "He likes to have me drive him down by the gulf. He has a special spot there. It's just an old ragged stretch with a little pier that sticks out in some oily junk-filled water. But that's where he has me take him."

"We always take my car because Jason doesn't drive, takes a taxi wherever he goes; one of his quirks. Anyway, he has me drive him out there and we park and look out over that ugly stretch of water and talk. He tells me that he used to go there as a kid to sort out his problems and he has a lot of childhood memories about that place."

"It's almost like an honor to share it with him." She looked out from her dreams and cigaret smoke. "Damn!" she said. "I must be getting old and sentimental. I sound like a fool."

"Not hardly," Slater said. "Not hardly."

They sat for a moment in awkward silence, then Slater said, "Leona, you were here the night of the argument?"

"Argument? *Oh!*" She said. "You mean with Anibal? How'd you know about that?"

"Bartender. You know Anibal very well?"

"No. I've never really met him. Matter of fact, the night of the argument was the only time I've ever seen him in the flesh. I've seen pictures of him, but that's it. Why Jason worries about that fool kid I'll never know. It bothers him no end that the kid dislikes him. It's almost like a father-son generation-gap thing."

"That might be putting it lightly from what I've heard. Tell me about the argument."

She put her cigaret out in the ashtray. "Not much to tell. The kid got steamed up about the way he thought Jason was pushing him, had a few beers too many and came to tell Jason what he thought of him."

"Jason gave him hell for drinking, breaking training, something like that, and Anibal got mad enough to jerk him up from the table. They shouted at each other

a bit, then Anibal let go and stomped out."

"No blows?"

"No. Just a lot of yelling. Jason told me after the kid left that he was going out back for some fresh air and that he'd see me at closing time. He didn't come back. It worried me, but not a lot. Jason was a tempermental guy and did that sort of thing now and then, often enough that I was used to it and didn't worry too much. Till now. Right now I'm worried."

"The night of the argument, the bartender tells me Jason was pretty drunk. That right?"

"He'd been drinking, but he wasn't drunk. I've never seen him drunk. James would tell you that though. He thinks I should stick with young white men, like him. James isn't my type by a long shot. He loves to think Jason is a no-good drunk. It builds his ego."

"A little thing. James tells me that Anibal went out the front way. What about that?"

"Uh-huh. And Jason went out the back. They didn't leave five seconds apart of each other."

"Okay. Another thing. James says Jason passes out a lot of bucks. That true?"

"Yeah. He's a heavy tipper. I've told him that sort of thing could get him in trouble. I hope..."

The lights went suddenly dim. A reheated woman with a movie starlet's build, if not a starlet's face, came out on the little stage

wrapped in a Chinese-style robe and yelled, "Five minutes, Leona." The redhead's voice was as sharp as a knife.

Leona waved a hand at her, turned back to Slater. "Head honcho. I've got to get a move on."

"One more thing, and I'll make it quick."

"Shoot."

"This spot where the two of you go — the pier. Could you tell me where it is?"

She had stood up from the table to go, now she sat back down, clasped her hands together, said, "May I ask why?"

"No particular reason. Just following a few hunches. Nothing really."

Leona stared at Slater's trained impassiveness for a long moment.

"Got a pen," she finally said.

Slater picked an old ballpoint from his coat pocket, gave it to her.

"It's easy to find," she said, and she pulled a napkin from the holder and started drawing. When she was almost finished the redhead came out and screamed at her again. The knife-edged voice was sharper than before. Over his shoulder Leona said, "Coming, coming."

She handed Slater the map and pen. The shadows clung to her face like spiders. She said, "Listen, I love Jason, very much. I know it sounds silly but I'm telling you this because when you

find him, even if it's bad, I want to know. My phone number is there on the napkin."

Slater looked at it, folded it away in his pocket.

"Promise me you'll let me know," she said. "Promise me that."

"I promise," Slater said.

"Good." She wiped at her eyes.

"Contacts. I never have gotten used to them. Find him, please."

Slater nodded.

Leona turned and walked away quickly. Slater watched her go up the stage steps, across to the once-dark-blue curtains and disappear behind them. He got up and made his way through the gathering crowd and out to the car, drove away feeling strangely small and very very alone.

It was about a five-block drive to the place on Leona's map. More than a rock's throw, but no great trek. Slater eased his Chevy down an embankment made by recent bull-dozing, and parked near a rickety weather-chewed stretch of pier. He took a flashlight from the glove box and got out.

The salt spray blew cold against his cheek and stung his nostrils. The timber pilings of the pier creaked with the rolling motion of the water. Paper and other debris discarded by beach lovers blew up around his ankles and crunched underfoot.

He went down to the pier and walked out on it. It creaked ominously. There was an odor of

decaying fish closer to the water, and when Slater played the beam on the shadowed sea, it looked dead, dirty and forgotten. Across the way, the lights of some factory's nightshift showed their smoke rising into the blackness of the night, fading the moon. Down on the water the lights cast murky shadows. Behind him, over the rise, he could hear the hurry of traffic.

He flashed the light all around, turned, walked off the pier and went up and down the beach with the same lack of results.

Then he had a hunch. He didn't know what else to call it — just a thought, a strong thought. He went back to the pier and walked out on the lip, got down on his stomach, hung his upper body over and worked the flash around.

It was a good hunch.

It floated in the shallow brine halfway between the embankment and the shabby creosote piling that held up the left rear of the pier. Only half of it was showing. The torso was bloated. The shirt that covered it was black from water and stuffed as tight as a German sausage. The head was grey, shapeless, with a lot of flesh missing. The arms were the same. Most likely crabs had been feeding. The body seemed to be held in place by the debris collected beneath the pier — a bobbing cork once human.

Slater flicked off the flash and vomited in the water.

V

IT WAS HARD TO tell positively at such quick notice, as no identification was on the body, but the Gulf City cops agreed with Slater that it was most likely what was left of Jason Krim. As to the cause of death — too early to tell. But neither the police nor Slater thought it an accidental drowning.

Slater refused to tell how he found out about the pier or about Anibal Martinez and the borrowed Lincoln. He told them it was coincidence. He didn't think they believed him for a moment. Slater and the Gulf City cops were not on the best of terms.

Slater wanted to talk to Yank first before he tipped his hand. Of course the cops would get to Yank first. That's why he wanted to wait. Yank, solid as he was, might be inexperienced in these matters and let slip more than the cops need know at the moment. Besides, Slater decided, he needed time to think and rest.

After the usual hard time, the cops surprised him and let him go with a promise to stay in touch. Getting while the getting was good, Slater drove away from the station at just the proper speed, made sure to use his signals.

He tried to sort the whole business out in his mind. He decided he should feel pretty relieved about the whole matter, but somehow the decision wasn't

enough. The missing persons case had been wrapped up in less than 24 hours and the cops, for some unknown generous reason, weren't holding him for withholding information, downright lying, in fact. As for the reason behind Krim's death...

Not his worry — Slater tried to convince himself. His job was to find Krim, nothing more. That he had done. It didn't help the image of Krim's bloated mutilated body fade from his thoughts however. He wasn't looking forward to sleep and dreams.

Maybe, if Slater had not been so intent on his thoughts, he would have noticed earlier than he did that a grey late-model Plymouth was following him. It looked just like the one he had seen before after leaving Yank's gym. He could see it clearly beneath the street lights.

The Plymouth swung up behind Slater with a sudden burst of power, hung on his tail so close he felt as if he were pulling it with a chain. He gave the Chevy the gas, darted in and out of traffic, which was reasonably heavy, and scared hell out of more than a few motorists. One of them gave Slater her middle finger to look at. The pursuing Plymouth received the same salute.

Slater made a quick turn in front of a brake-screaming Volkswagon, darted off the main drag onto a lightless street called Pleasant. In the rearview mirror, he saw the

Plymouth make the same corner, still hot on his trail.

The Chevy was making a sound like a strangled pig, but Slater kept pushing it. He took a quick right, almost on two wheels, then a quicker left, certainly on two wheels, then a more reserved right up a residential street.

He almost ran over a luminous DEAD END sign. Slamming hard on the brakes, he slid slightly to a stop, killed the lights, put it in reverse. He checked the rearview mirror for lights. Nothing. He backed a hundred feet, caught a flick of lights out of the corner of his eye. Jerking it in D, he pulled up in a driveway and sat.

No dogs barked. No lights in the house came on.

Beams that might have belonged to the Plymouth paused at the intersection, then went on. After sitting for another 20 minutes, avoiding the cigaret he was dying to have, he eased out of the drive with his lights off. He had the window down and his ears cocked. Straining his eyes into the darkness, he eased up to the intersection.

The Plymouth wasn't hiding around the corner.

Slater turned on his lights and drove home.

Old age, Slater figured, was probably not a very good excuse, but it just might have been part of the reason he drove home not expecting them to be waiting for him. They had done their home-

work.

He pulled the Chevy up the drive and parked it in front of the carport and got out. He was starting up the walk when the metal door to the carport flew up with a shrieking sound.

A big man with a shaved head, grey squinty eyes and a nose that could have pecked its way through a cement block stood where the door had been. He held a .45 automatic in his hand. It was pointing at Slater's chest.

"Hi, sugar," the bald man said. "We've been waiting for you."

Slater raised his hands slowly. Even if he had been wearing a gun it would have been of no avail. Baldy had him dead to rights. Behind him he heard a car pull up the drive and park behind his Chevy.

Baldy waved the .45. "Turn around and move."

Slater turned toward the grey Plymouth. The man behind the wheel looked every bit as bright and handsome as a lobotomized gorilla. Almost as big, too.

Moving before the prod of the .45, Slater walked around to the passenger side and got in. Baldy sandwiched Slater in between himself and Gorilla. "Let's go," Baldy said.

Gorilla backed the Plymouth out on Mulberry and drove over to Southmore. From there he made a left off Southmore and down a dark narrow street that led away from the sight, sound and lights of Pasadena proper. Slater real-

ized that pretty soon they'd be out in the boondocks. The thought did not cheer him.

"Guess where we're taking you, snooper?" Gorilla asked sweetly.

The drive-in movies?" Slater answered.

"Hey!" Gorilla growled across to Baldy. "The snooper's got a sense of humor."

Baldy threw a heavy arm around Slater's shoulders. "Good. That's real good, snoop, cause you're gonna need a sense of humor for what we've got in mind. We're gonna give you somethin' to scream about."

Slater sat quietly, thinking, weighing his chances. Baldy removed his arms, put his fingers together and cracked his knuckles.

"Impatient?" Slater asked.

Baldy just smiled.

Gorilla turned off at a dark dirt road decorated with storage buildings and an all-too occasional burglar light. When they had gone a little less than half a block, he pulled over next to a row of aluminum warehouses and parked. Baldy got out and waved Slater to follow with the barrel of his .45. Gorilla got out on his side and went around to meet them.

Gorilla said, "You know, snooper, we could make this easy on you. Just one shot between the peepers and no more snooper." Gorilla showed the detective a tight grin. "But me and Sol don't go for no cheap way out.

"You see, I sort of enjoy my work, if you know what I mean. What's the fun of blowing a guy's brains out and making a lot of noise, when I can beat them out and enjoy myself a whole lot better."

He was cracking his knuckles now, warming up to the task. The knuckle-cracking, Slater thought dryly, must be something of a trademark for the pair.

Sol moved up close on Slater's right side.

Slater said, "Sol's going to hold me while you prove how tough you are, or is he going to shoot a leg out from under me so I won't be able to play rough?"

Gorilla scowled. "You like playing the tough guy, don't you peeper?"

"It's not like I have a lot of competition in you boys."

"Ahhh!" Gorilla growled. "Okay, snooper, I'm gonna give you your big break, if you catch my drift. I hate you snoopers. Always with your big nose where it don't belong. So instead of beating your brains in real quick, I'm gonna make it hurt so bad you're gonna wish I *would* kill you."

"Your mouth is doing that now."

Gorilla snarled and threw up his big fist.

"The hell with this, Jerry," Sol said. He pointed the .45 at Slater. Slater winced.

Gorilla reached out and slapped his hand over Sol's gun and

pushed it down. "Naw, let me have my fun."

Sol sighed, looked at his watch. "Make it quick. Put him away."

"Unh-unh, I'm gonna make him beg some first."

Gorilla took a boxer's stance and shuffled forward.

VI.

EVEN WHILE PICKING a fight with Gorilla, Slater had used the distraction to examine his surroundings. To the right of him was a row of storage stalls. To the left were a dirt road, a pasture and, in the distance, a few anemic house lights. Behind him was a chest-high chain-length fence and, behind that, a small stock pond that the moon showed to be below the water line.

Across the way was another fence and, opposite it, lightless houses. The only remaining direction was forward, and in that path lay the Plymouth, Gorilla and Sol with his worthy companion, Colt .45. That was Slater's last choice.

Gorilla was three feet away from Slater, bobbing and weaving. It looked as if he knew something about the fight game.

So did Slater.

Slater went up on his toes, started shuffling.

Gorilla went for him like a heat-seeking missile.

Slater sidestepped nimbly and lashed out with a roundhouse kick to the burly man's groin. It struck

Gorilla with a *whap*. He stumbled, blew out some air. Slater stepped in deep and slammed an elbow down, hard, into the small of the man's back. He made sure the blow wasn't too hard. He didn't want to put him away quick. That would mean a .45 slug in the head. Slater had other plans. He stepped back.

Gorilla got his back straight, blew out some short, choppy breaths, took in a few deep ones.

"Something take your breath away?" Slater chided.

The injured man got his back straight, said through wheezes, "I'm gonna — huhhuh — tear you — huhuhu — apart."

"Do tell," Slater said and the moonlight flicked off his smile. He stepped in quick and popped a few sucker punches at the big man's face.

Bulling his way forward, the Gorilla flicked out a lucky left and nipped Slater on the cheek. Slater managed to slip it well enough so as to get only a buzz from the blow. It got Gorilla excited, however. He thought he was moving in for the kill.

Slater let him come, flicked two stinging lefts to his eyes, went for the same combination of lefts. This time Gorilla parried. That was what Slater wanted.

He faked another left and, when the big man's hands went up to protect his face, the detective surprised him with a sharp kick to the kneelap followed by a sizzling

right cross that staggered the enraged behemoth, but didn't send him down for the full count.

Slater slacked off, danced a little. Gorilla followed.

Slater's snazzy footwork was gradually moving him backward, carrying him eventually to the fence. He pressed his back tight against it, put up his hands and looked determined to hold his ground.

Gorilla smiled. He felt he had the detective penned now, and without room to move he concluded that his size and strength would win the day.

Slater had other plans. When Gorilla was nearly on top of him, he bent his knees, ducked his head and kicked back and up with all his might. The effort sent him over the fence backwards. He hit on his side and rolled to his feet running.

"Sonofabitch," Sol, or Baldy, as Slater unaffectionately thought of him, said.

"What the...?" Gorilla said.

"*Out of my way*," Sol yelled and jerked the .45 up to fire. His aim was dead on target.

But Slater suddenly became a zigging target. The shot missed by inches, sang off into the night. Another blast and Slater's neck burned, but it was only a graze.

Slater zigged and zagged all the way to the other fence, went over it like a professional high jumper and landed in an unprofessional heap on the far side.

The two goons jumped into the

Plymouth, turned it around with a screech of tires and headed around the other way, hoping to cut their prey off.

Slater stumbled to his feet, realized he was in someone's backyard. He veered wide of the house. He had no intention of drawing innocent bystanders into this. Crossing the blacktop road in front of the dwelling, he melted into a thick clump of trees that a real estate sign said was ready to be bought and contracted.

He caught the lights of the Plymouth out of the corner of his eye when he dove into the undergrowth. The grey car came by slowly and Sol hung a flashlight out the window, bobbed it into the trees.

Slater was lying behind a clump of thick foliage, making like ground moss. The beam didn't hit him.

They made several passes flashing the light. Finally they stopped, got out of the car and went down into the trees for a looksee.

Slater inched his way into a wet ditch that smelled of sewer or something equally rank, pressed himself down tight in the mulch and held his breath.

He listened to the crunching of leaves and the talking of hushed voices for what seemed like an hour but could have been only minutes. Then, when the sounds stopped, he listened some more.

Silence reigned for another hour

or so. Finally, he heard grumbled cursing, the sound of leaf-crunching feet about their business again.

They came right up to him, flashed their beam into the ditch once, but the shadows and Lady Luck protected him. He didn't breathe.

More time passed and the cursing began again, and he heard the sound of heavy feet going away. Car doors slammed, an engine coughed to life.

Slater crawled out of the ditch and elbowed his way back to where he could get a good look. The moonlight showed the Plymouth pulling away lickety split for Pasadena. It seemed that the goons had given him up.

Perhaps, thought Slater, they would have looked longer had they known he had memorized their license plates, and of course, he knew their first names, Sol and Jerry. Obviously these were not things that would have worried them earlier. That sort of information doesn't help a dead man.

Brushing himself off as best as he could, Slater made his stealthy way over to the house next to the fence. He wrote a nice note of signed explanation on a check stub, stuffed it in the screen door of the house, hot-wired the 69 Galaxie in the drive with his pocket knife and drove the long way back to Strawberry Street.

Keeping an eye out for the Plymouth, he parked a block from

his office and walked back. He used his key and took the stairs up. He unlocked his office door and went inside cautiously. No one was waiting.

He got some fresh clothes out of the closet, washed up in the bathroom, and changed. Next he got the .38 out of the desk drawer and loaded it. He put it in his coat pocket, went back down to the Galaxie and drove over to Gulf City and Happy's Good Time Bar, stopping along the way to make a phone call.

VIII

HAPPY'S WASN'T closed but preparations were being made. All the outside lights were off, even the neon, curlicue, beer, wine and stripper signs. The inside lights were on. That meant the crowd had cleared or was clearing rapidly. Honkytonkers don't honkeytonk under the glare of lights. It cramps the style.

The last couple in the place was coming out as Slater went in. James the bartender was wiping off tables, pusing chairs around. Slater didn't see any other employees. It seemed they had all gone home. James looked up.

"Closing, Mr. Private Eye," James sneered.

Slater got out a cigaret and lit it, slowly. Said, "Do I denote a touch of sarcasm in your voice?"

James shrugged, balled up the rag and started back for the bar,

scooping up a couple of empty beer mugs as he went. He eased around behind the bar, plumped down the beer mugs.

"I said, I'm closing."

"So you did," Slater said and he walked over to a stool, sat down across the bar from James.

"Shall I call the cops?"

"That won't be necessary. I've already taken care of that. They ought to be here at any moment." For emphasis, Slater glanced at the clock on the wall. "I think you and I have the time we need, however."

"Time for what?"

"Chit-chat. Wouldn't want to draw us up a couple of beers, would you?"

James didn't move.

"You know," Slater continued, "I really had my doubts about who murdered Krim." Slater looked at James for a reaction. He looked bored.

Jason put both hands on the bartop with the rag stretched out nicely between them. "Say your little piece if it'll make you feel better — then, *get out!*"

Slater put his cigaret out on the bartop and watched James frown.

"You see," Slater said, "I thought Martinez was the man at all times. I mean he was right for it, and with your telling me how you saw him load Krim into the Lincoln... Well, that was good, James, real good.

"But no, it wasn't Martinez. The persons responsible for that

were a couple of cops. I met them personally. You knew I would I'm sure of that. Actually you're kind of surprised to see me, aren't you?" James didn't look surprised. Slater continued.

"The only bad thing is the cops slipped. I got away with their descriptions, the car's description and their license number. They didn't try to keep that stuff concealed. Why would they? With me dead, it wouldn't matter.

"Now I don't know it for positive, but when I called the police, which was right before I came here, I left that license number with them. I'm sure when they run it down, it'll belong to a plain-clothes, Gulf City cop that looks like a gorilla. I'm sure, too, that discovery will lead to the identification of his egghead friend.

"You see, James. They have to be cops — the same cops this place passes the payoff money to. That's why there wasn't any investigation in this area. Those two were the officers in charge. Slick, James, real slick."

"And why am I hearing all this?"

Slater ignored him. "Oh yeah, they have to be cops. How else would they know Yank was hiring himself a private detective. He asked around at the Gulf City and the Pasadena stations, that's how. I'll even narrow it down a little more. They were Gulf City cops. I know that because, when I left the Gulf City station tonight and

started home, these two goons show up and try to do me in."

"Like I said, Slater. Why am I hearing all this?"

"What I'm getting at is the murder of Jason Krim."

"Can't pin that on me. I was right here all the time."

"Oh, I believe you were here. Like I said, the cops did it." Slater glared into the bartender's eyes. "But I think you paid them to lean on the old man."

James flipped the rag from under his hands and draped it over the edge of the bar, got a cigaret out and lit it with a disposable lighter. He put the cigaret pack and the lighter back in his pocket. Slater thought maybe his hands were shaking just a little.

James said, "Atso?"

"Uh-huh, atso."

James took some puffs on his weed, smiled around it. "You're not sticking me with no bum rap."

"I figured maybe you didn't mean for them to kill him," Slater admitted. "Just teach him a lesson. Too bad. Those guys like their work. Maybe the old war-horse put up a bigger fight than they expected. He was old, but no pushover."

"If you're trying to scare me to death," James said, "you're doing a lousy job." He moved down the bar toward the spot where his hand had disappeared during his and Slater's first heart-to-heart talk.

Slater eased his .38 out of his

pocket and laid it on the bar, kept his hand on top of it. Slater said, "My memory's better than that. Both hands on deck."

James put his hands where Slater could see them, opened and closed them. He tried to maintain his confident air, but there was sweat on his upper lip and the sarcastic smile was a little crooked now.

"May I have a drink," he asked.

"Sure. Why not — but do be careful. I'm very excitable."

James turned to the counter slowly, picked up a shot glass and a bottle, poured himself a healthy one, went back to his station at the bar.

"Remember the hands," Slater advised.

"And just why should I go to all this trouble?" James said, then tossed off half the drink.

"It would be nice if it were really complex, some kind of boxing-world scandal, drugs, that sort of thing. It's a lot older and less complicated, however. Jealousy, or maybe more directly, rejection. You couldn't stand that Leona turned you down for an older man, and a black one at that."

"You can't prove a damn thing."

"Now I'll grant you that a lot of this is guesswork, but when the cops start looking, I bet they find a lot of juicy material to work with. Not that they'll need it. Those two-bit cops will probably

sing to high heaven. You'll be in the song, James."

James turned his shot glass around and around in his hand. His eyes were hooded, his lips drawn.

Slater went on, "Here's how I got it figured. Jason come in and makes a hit with Leona. Too bad for James-boy. He's not quite the romancer he thought and, worse yet, in your mind, it's a turndown for an inferior. What a blow to the ego!

"Now let's take two crooked cops who like the long green and, since they don't mind stretching the rules to get it, *and*, since you're onto their little racket here, maybe you have a little talk with them.

Maybe you tell them that if they'll lean on the old man, you'll see that they get a few extra bucks. You know Jason's routine, so, you point him out and they wait for him to leave. You might even be hoping that Leona will be with him, most likely would be since he doesn't drive.

"Anyway, damned if things don't work out better than expected. You even get your fall guy. Martinez comes in, gives Jason a hard time and stomps out mad in plain sight of everybody. Your cop friends are posted nearby and they spot him leaving, know who he is.

"That's when they catch that he's driving the Lincoln, and that little piece of information is good for later. That makes a nice believ-

able touch when you tell me you saw Martinez loading the old man in the back seat.

"Okay, Jason goes out and decides to take a walk. Why not? He hasn't got a car and he hasn't called a taxi. He wants to walk off his anger. His favorite mediating place is nearby. Okay, he walks down into the boonies and the cops couldn't have planned it better themselves, so they follow him down to the pier, and zap! The old man's out for the full count.

"That's the mess-up. It's unlikely that Martinez would have enough time to beat it around back and clobber Krim just in time for you to take out the garbage. But I'll give you that possibility.

"What I won't give you is the coincidence that the spot Anibal chooses to dump the body is Krim's one special spot. I suppose you could have lied about the Lincoln, and he could have still followed Krim and done him in, but in that cases the cops wouldn't have been on my tail.

"Too many things, James. Far too many. You were reluctant to talk to me, worried about the cops. Then I learned this place has a couple of cops on the payroll and two guys start following me around. Well, it just started to add up.

"You know, James. Maybe if you'd kept those cops off me the three of you might have gotten

away with it."

"Might yet," James snapped and there was a blur of glass and whisky whirling in Slater's face. The detective ducked left, caught sight of James' hand snaking out from beneath the bar. There was a revolver in it.

Slater's move carried him down and behind the bar just as the shot slammed into the wood and sent splinters into his face.

The worse part about it was Slater had left his .38 on the bartop. In the movies, he would have leapt up, grabbed it at a roll and shot the culprit between the eyes. This wasn't the movies. Slater had made a frightened, stupid move and that was all there was to it.

James palmed himself over the bar top and pointed the revolver at Slater's head. His smile was as chill as the arctic wind. "Goodby, Mr. Private Eye." He cocked back the hammer.

The room was a cannon roar.

VIII

JAMES THREW UP his left hand like a man tossing confetti to the wind. The revolver flew up and into the bottles behind the bar. the sound of tinkling glass seemed every bit as loud as an avalanche. James' feet went out from under him and he fell against the bar and began to slide languidly to the floor. A red stream blew high and wide from his shoulder and

seemed to come down in slow, mesmerized droplets. In the doorway, gun in hand, stood Homicide dick Randle Burney. Two blue suits came in behind him. He walked over to Slater, putting the gun away. He picked a yellow handkerchief that was supposed to be white from his pocket and wiped his perspiring forehead with it. His hand was shaking ever so slightly.

"You know, Slater," he said. "You're a lot of trouble."

Slater let himself breathe, got up and went over to the bar for his .38. "I seem to have misplaced this in a moment of crisis," he said in a voice calmer than he felt.

Burney turned to the blue suits who were hovering over James. One of them said, "Nice shooting. Put the shoulder out of comission."

"Swell," Burney lied. "I was aiming for his head."

The blue suit smiled at him. "No notch this time. This one will live. I'll radio an ambulance."

Burney turned back to Slater, who had gone around behind the bar and poured himself a stiff one. "What was the idea of calling and telling us to meet you here pronto? That was crazy, Slater. Why?"

"I don't know for sure. I had to talk it out, get some kind of result. I just had a few clues and a lot of hunch."

"Uh-huh, and if we'd been one second later we'd have been picking you off the floor with a

vacuum cleaner."

"The license number I left with you. Was it what I thought?"

"Halfway here we got the radio message. It's the number belonging to a Gulf City cop, just like you thought. We've already got feelers out for him and whoever his partner is. It shouldn't be hard, considering they aren't expecting us to know."

Slater nodded, went over to look at James. He was mercifully unconcious and breathing heavily. The blue suit had stopped the flow of blood with simple first aid. "I think it hit the bone and went out the back of his arm," the cop said.

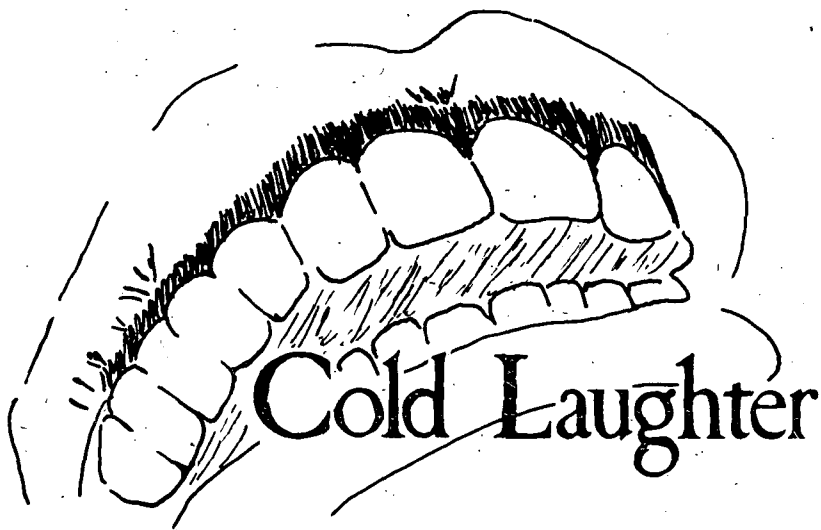
"It's up to the ambulance now," Burney said. "I've got my car outside. I think we better go down to the station, Slater."

"Fine," the detective said. "But first I need to return a stolen car."

By the time Slater had finished with the cops and talked with Yank it was almost daybreak. He went home and sat in the dying dark, drank a beer, smoked cigaret and thought about poor old Jason and the sweet stripper named Leona Blue who loved him.

He kept rolling the napkin with her phone number on it around and around between his fingers, wishing that when he finally got up the nerve to keep his promise, there would be something comforting he could say.

He picked up the phone and dialed.



by **MOSS TADRACK**

Ryan thought harrassing Jimmy T. Bitts was good fun--but Jimmy failed to get the joke.

KNOW YOUR FRIENDS! Know them well! Jimmy T. Bitts swore by his rule, for not many dips could boast of seven years without a bust. As he skirted the hyena enclosure, he caught sight of the stranger. The stranger slouched, elbows propped, on a redwood rail. Deep, throaty chuckles emanated from Jason and Helena, Jimmy's spotted hyena friends.

"Mr. Bitts! Know who I am?"

"What ya mean...?" Jimmy

choked. "Never saw you in my life."

"Ryan's the name. Tom. They imported me from LA. You got a shopping bag there, Friend. An old trick. You lift another wallet on my territory, and you're dead. Like, morgue! Get it?"

Ryan's laugh ran cold counterpoint to Jason and Helena's hysterical amusement. Jimmy backed off uneasily. Ryan's hair was too trim, his shave too close.

If nobody in Frisco knew, how could this wiseacre know? "What ya talking about?"

"Bitts? Five foot-two. One hundred-twenty pounds. Going bald. I new a Bitts once, back in Mo Town. Twenty years ago. Things have changed since then. Somebody wants a clean area. Really clean! Like, no scum, no nothing — they import me."

With icy calm, Ryan shifted his left shoulder forward. His black nylon jacket flopped carelessly open and the butt of his .357 Magnum slid menacingly into view.

"Look, Mr. Ryan. What's wrong? I never did nothing. Honest. I mind my own business. What you want to bug me for?"

"Know what they're paying me? *Plenty!* Why? They want it clean! Know what happened in Santa Barb? They had a slimy little area. Nothing big, mind you. Just slimy. I cleaned it up."

Jimmy got all the way to Gino, the hippo's pool, before he stopped. Gino immediately stuck up two ears and opened his mouth wide. Silly old hippo! Jimmy hadn't given him carrots in years, but Gino remembered. All the zoo animals were his friends, every single one of them. What he liked best was sitting near Phoebe, the Asian elephant, and watching Phoebe snort peanuts and toss them into her mouth.

"Such biggie-wiggie cuteums. Such teenzie-weenzie snookums."

A mother said once, crazily, to her child.

Jimmy did none of that. Hours of silent communication had taught Jimmy how Phoebe was often content simply to eyeball him. Eye to eye! Jimmy read her soul. Phoebe did not dream about jungles like so many kids thought. Phoebe dreamed of waterfalls, of ocean beaches, and what she liked best was the soft shimmer of surf on golden sand.

Her elephant soul simply swarmed with water images beyond size and beyond description.

To get from Detroit to Frisco had taken Jimmy a couple of years. Then, after working in a Department Store for ten, he had retired near the zoo. He had found contentment. His social security gave him basics. His trade gave him the rest. His zoo friends were his family. Sorry, the baboon, had even helped him out a few times. When saddled with a real tough mark, Jimmy contrived a stroll past Sorry's cage. Sorry did the rest. With agile, quick fingers, he reached out and magnetized wallets from impossible recesses in men's clothing.

Terribly upset, Jimmy stared at Arthur, the sea lion. He waved anxiously to Tracy, the dromedary camel. He didn't know what to do. Finally, he wandered back, cautiously, to the hyenas. The stranger was gone. Jason and Helena smiled at him with double

fulcrum jaws capable of 1000 pounds-per-square-inch pressure.

They could easily polish off a dinosaur. Jimmy reached into his pocket and found two dog biscuits. He tossed one to Helena, one to Jason. What would Ryan do to Jimmy's soul? The thought came down heavy. And what would Jimmy's friends do without him?

Back in his flat, Jimmy paced from fridge to sink, to sink to fridge. He avoided looking at the yellow cabinet over his green counter. Suddenly, he stepped up on his black vinyl barstool and looked behind the canisters.

It was still there.

No dip had one. Every dip avoided such things like poison. They didn't go with the territory. But thanks to Shuffles, the chimp, Jimmy had hidden away an object which chilled him more than the booking desk at Central Headquarters. It never ceased to astonish him, however, the dextrous way in which Shuffles had extricated the weapon from a careless cop. In Jimmy's slim hand, the gun felt gigantic and grotesque. He didn't even bother to rub off its thick coating of dust. Its blued steel disgusted him too much. After chucking the gun back into place he lined up each cannister with extreme care.

The next day, Jimmy hesitated about returning to the zoo. Should he? Shouldn't he? But how could he betray his friends? Jimmy dodged the peanut stand. He

eluded the African elephants. After a quick run past the gorillas, he stood several yards away from the hyena enclosure. Ryan slouched in the same place. With both Jason and Helena laughing long, raw, gulping sounds, all Jimmy could do was shiver.

Ryan turned to him and smiled. His smile was colder than Antarctica. No words, no threats popped out of his thin mouth, nothing but that cold rozen smile. When Jimmy swung away from the hyena enclosure, Ryan did not follow.

Ryan never followed him. Day after day, Ryan made his appearance at the Zoo, But Ryan didn't follow him. And yet, Ryan always seemed to know Jimmy's whereabouts. It got to be ridiculous. Jimmy gathered up his courage, and, after a week of nothing happening, decided to perform one of his sweetest tricks.

For even the oldest and most accomplished of pros, this dodge had always been difficult. For Jimmy it was easy. He had polished his sleight-of-hand to perfection. More often than not, he had one it simply to amuse Arthur, the sea lion.

He found the right mark, He misdirected skillfully. He fingered out the wallet, thumbed a few bills with his same hand. Then, giving a bow and a flourish, he slipped the wallet indifferently into the mark's rear pocket.

That day, late, when Jimmy left

the zoo, he was happily mulling over the fact Mr. Ryan was not quite as omnipresent as he had seemed. Jimmy was mistaken. Outside, leaning nonchalantly against a stone lion, Ryan greeted him with a cold burst of laughter.

"Friend, I warned you. You didn't listen."

"Huh?"

"An ancient dodge, Bitts. Motheaten! What made you think you could get away with it? Not even the mark knows how much you took. But, me! I do. You fingered twenty-nine clams. A twenty, a five, four ones. Want to give it to me now?"

Jimmy backed away, but not fast enough. Ryan's hand snaked out and caught his wrist.

"Easy, Friend. *Easy!*"

"But my animals..."

"Who said anything about animals? Just give me the money."

Day by day, Jimmy's nerves got worse. He felt as if he could never go into the zoo again, and yet he had to go. Even, Bozo, the big polar bear sensed his unrest and went snuffling around with a stuffed-up nose.

Tony, Big Papa gorilla, was equally sympathetic and tossed him a half-eaten eucalyptus branch. Even Sorry, the baboon, couldn't conceal his concern, and, with Jimmy looking on, did gyrations around his cage for an hour.

In an attempt at avoiding Ryan, Jimmy took to going to the zoo,

either very early, or very late. For days he didn't see Ryan, and thought that the man must have left the city. Unfortunately, he was mistaken again. While Jimmy knelt back of the elephant house, feeding two of his favorite squirrels, Ryan stepped up behind him.

"Two times. friend." Ryan said. "Two times! One more, and that's the brass ring. Remember the brass ring?"

"Brass ring?"

"Sure, Boston! Merry-go-round. Right after you left Detroit. Kids at Playland would ride around the outside and grab for it. I told ya, friend. I know all about ya. Every second."

"Mr. Ryan, you confuse me with somebody else."

"Two times, Friend. Once, when I first met you here at the Zoo. Second, when you lifted those twenty-nine bucks. I think you're finished, Jimmy. Like dead. Get it, friend, *dead!* Ha. Ha!"

Ryan's cold cackle followed him all the way home. There, among his zoo pictures and memorabilia, Jimmy could neither sleep nor rest. He had trouble stirring up his scrambled eggs in the morning. He couldn't eat his toast. Everything, including his coffee, tasted like acid.

He kept thinking his whole long relationship with the zoo was ruined and finished. He felt he couldn't hack it one more time. But what could he do? Why couldn't he walk in and com-

municate with his friends? What had happened to his pride? Why couldn't he see Jason and Helena?

Ten-fifteen on Thursday morning, the keepers were all having their coffee. No visitors strolled around. Jimmy didn't see Ryan. Yet he knew it was now or never. He had spent hours figuring it all out. With studied art, Jimmy flipped his shopping bag.

The cold wind from the Pacific made his bag seem empty. He felt its weight. The bag was actually a holdover from the days when he had given all his friends snacks. But Jimmy didn't disobey the zoo rules any longer. He respected his friends too much. Their diets were too important to him.

Since there were so few visitors to choose from, Jimmy spent some time seaching for the ideal mark. Finally, right in front of the tapir and flamingo pond, Jimmy found him. The mark's blue sport coat was too new, his casual shoes too polished and shiny.

Jimmy did the whole extraction, by misdirection. He gazed enraptured into the flamingo pool. The mark's eye caught the wild burst of pink flame. Jimmy's fingers sped up and into the jacket pocket. If the mark felt anything at all, he must have thought it a burst of wind.

Casually, Jimmy dropped the black wallet into his bag.

He didn't have long to wait. Just as he scooted past the elephant house, Ryan popped into his path.

A few yards away, Jason and Helena set up a maniacal and impatient giggling.

"So, friend, yo disobeyed. Want to give me the wallet? *Now!*"

Jimmy hefted his bag and smiled. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ryan. What makes you think..."

"Friend, the wallet. *Now!*"

Wind tossed Jimmy's bag. For a long time, Ryan stared, almost suckered into the well controlled illusion of the bag's emptiness.

"You can't fool me, Bitts!" Ryan shoved out his right hand. "I know all your tricks. That black wallet is in your bag."

Jimmy reached into his bag, and, for a second, fumbled something slippery. It was only for a second, however, for when his bag fell away, he wasn't fumbling at all. Jimmy held the police .38 aimed rock-hard at Ryan's waist.

A sudden and sat doubt blossomed n Ryan's frigid eyes.

"Friend, wait... *Wait!* This is not my beat. I happened to see you. I recognized you. But it was nothing but a joke, Friend. Nobody hired me. It was a joke, don't you see? *A joke!*"

Nearby, immensely excited, Jason and Helena pranced with hungry expectation. Their jaws were silent. It was only after the shot, when they smelled the fresh odor of the kill, that they broke their silence. Then, the sound came out, for Jimmy's benefit, in one great burst of happy, maniacal, bone-chilling laughter.

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by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

Trapped in a little Mexican town by lack of funds and passport, Winters was at a dead end until the **guerillera** girl became his cook. Then he found himself in a squeeze that took all his experience, ingenuity and daring--plus some luck--to escape.

WINTERS HAD BEEN having trouble sleeping. With reason. His money was running out, and even in a crumbling, seventeenth century mountain town like *Sán Sebastian de los Pinos*, you need pesos in your pocket if you hope to keep *frijoles* in the pot and *carne* on the grill.

There was also the matter of his papers. Two long months now, they'd been overdue — yet his inquiries at the *Hacienda* brought only mumblings about the new changed immigration law and bottlenecks at *Gobernacion*.

All of which no doubt was true enough — but, in Winters' wary

eye, perhaps not quite *all* the truth.

More likely, the hand of Colonel Vasques, *jefe de policia*, was busy pulling strings again, playing games designed to strip Winters down to the last centavo — partly out of greed, of course; but more from gut-reaction hate, sprung to life full-blown the moment he first laid eyes on Winters — the kind of thing psychologists call personality conflict.

Winters smiled wryly. Antagonism was an emotion he could understand where he and Vaquez were concerned. The sentiment was mutual.

Unfortunately, that offered no answer to his problem. Until his papers came through, there was no legal way he could leave San Sebastian.

Further, with the years hanging heavier and heavier on him, and even though he still thought of himself as a young man, Winters had developed a distinct taste for legality. He had no yen to be on the run once more, with every man's hand against him.

Yet without money, and with no working papers, there was no way he could stay in San Sebastian. Superannuated veterans of the 1930s' Spanish Civil War were a drug on the market. Granted, if he'd been smart, he'd have opted for *Inmigrado* status years ago.

But in those days, somehow, there were always old friends and lucrative chores available. And

even though the chores tended to the hazardous, he'd preferred them to jumping through hoops at any government's behest.

So, now, Winters had trouble sleeping. Nor were his waking hours better. More and more, he found himself falling into foul-tempered moods...sinking deeper and deeper into the kind of crotchitiness he'd always found so distasteful in others.

Yet what could he do? Which way could he turn? How could he cope?

Then, on September 14, the day before the *Grito*, he heard about the *guerrilleros*.

He picked up the word first in the course of his morning walk through the plaza. There had been three of them, the rumor went. Two boys and a girl — all armed and, now, all dead. Their car had gone off the road on the old Rincon Rebada curve about a week ago, from the condition of the bodies. Its trunk, the investigating officers had discovered, was packed to capacity with plastic explosives and machine pistols.

Which, of course, made them *guerrilleros*, revolutionaries — *guevarista* types like those down in Guerrero or those in Jalisco who had kidnapped Leonhardy. Finding their bodies had the police in such a dither they were shoving people off the sidewalk in front of the city hall with rifle butts as if some kind of attack in force on San Sebastian were imminent.

Winters pondered it all with automatically masked interest. Simultaneously, for the hundredth time, he speculated about Lupe.

Neat, pretty, dark-eyed, smooth-skinned Lupe. Seventeen, perhaps, and his maid for all of five days now.

Obviously, in view of the state of his finances, he needed a *criada* about as much as he needed an extra hole in the head. But it was a weakness of Winters that he was constitutionally incapable of standing face to face with woe unmoved. Beggars chortled in delight at the sight of him. He could start for the market with a pocket full of *veintes*, but be lacking so much as a five-centavo copper by the time he got there.

So it had been with Lupe. When she knocked at his door, asking for work, he had opened his mouth to tell her, "No, sorry. *Lo siento*." But such was some quality about her — her youth, her fear-filled eyes, her air of desperation — that he had found himself asking her in, even while his ears rang with startlement at the words he himself was saying.

Now, caught up in the buzz of *guerrillero* rumors, more than ever he found himself wondering about her.

There was the matter of her background, for one thing. She claimed to be from some village without a name, far off the road in Tamaulipas. En route by bus to Mexico City to visit a sister, she

had lost her pocketbook and so was stranded here in San Sebastian, without money or friends or ever her sister's address.

Such things did happen, Winters knew, especially to poor country women. Yet Lupe's speech was clear and precise, lacking the slurs and archaic forms and Indianisms that were hallmarks of the *campesina*. Winters had a feeling she had to strain even to be ungrammatical.

Neither did she look or act the part of the typical *criada*. She was clean, for one thing — had even taken a shower without permission, clear proof she had either worked for some American before, or was from a different class than that she pretended. Her hands lacked scars and calluses, too. She wore shoes that fitted. And her housekeeping had a tentative air about it, as if she weren't quite sure what she was doing.

The street door squealed open and then closed again while Winters still stood frowning. It made for a quick decision. Machine-pistol in hand, he stepped into the living room arch as Lupe entered the kitchen.

Bottles shattered on the stone floor. Lupe ran for the patio.

But Winters already had her by the shoulder. They struggled briefly while he searched her. It ended with is shoving her bodily into one of the big chairs. "All right, *chica*," he said grimly. "It's time you did some talking — to

me, or to the *jefe de policia*. Take your choice."

Her story, it turned out, was simple enough. She and the three other young people had been making an arms run from Mexico City to Leon. She had survived the wreck by pure freak of fortune.

Could it be, then that there had been *two* girls in that carload of *guerrilleros*? That one, Lupe, had somehow been thrown clear of the wreck, eventually to end up on his doorstep?

Yet that hardly made sense either. His house was far up, far out, and in a neighborhood where no *criada* in her right mind would look for work.

Unless Colonel Vasquez had sent her. Confronted with three dead revolutionary gun-runners and, with a Republican Army veteran available whom he disliked, it was entirely conceivable that the *jefe* might think in terms of provocation or entrapment.

But if that were the case, why hadn't anything further happened? Not once had Lupe said a word out of line, or turned a hand to anything but housework.

Perhaps, Winters decided, he was growing paranoid and seeing spooks. Yet he couldn't quite convince himself of that, either. So, home again, he told Lupe he had forgotten to get *Agua Quina* and would she, *por favor*, go down to town and buy some?

It was a maneuver calculated to get her out of the house for at



least half an hour. The moment she left, he began searching.

SHE HAD HIDDEN THE THING clumsily, in one of the empty cartons stacked on top of the hot water heater closet — a machine-pistol of unfamiliar make, plus three fully-loaded 15-round magazines.

The sight of it chilled Winters. A gun like this, in his house — it was all he needed, with his record.

It did clear Colonel Vasquez, however. Not even he would dare leave such a weapon rattling around loose.

Because she was afraid the police would pick her up if she tried to escape the area, she had decided to hide out here in San Sebastian, temporarily playing maid in Winters' house.

Why his? Because she'd heard of him form a man she had met in the underground, a red-headed gringo alleged to be some sort of courier. He had told her about the years in Spain and after — the things Winters had done, the coups he had taken part in.

Winters swore aloud. Who the man was, he had no idea. Underground couriers had a talent for changing such incidentals as names and hair colors.

More important was the fact that he himself, long disenchanted, had worked hard to put the past behind him. Now, because of some idiot's babblings, here the lost years came at him again, alive and breathing, at a time he could least afford it.

Another thing bothered him also — the matter of Lupe's staying in San Sebastian instead of running. In a town this small, hazard ran high, for a stranger could not help but prove conspicuous. Her chances of losing herself in a larger place — Queretaro, Leon — were infinitely better.

He told her so bluntly, testing for reaction.

She gave none, unless the nervous twist of her fingers at her skirt-hem counted. Winters threw up his hands. "All right, then.

Have it your way. I'll let the *jefe* ask the questions."

"No, no! *Por favor*, no!" Her eyes met his for the first time. "Please! I beg you! You know what happens to girls taken to the *prefectura* —"

"Talk, then. Tell me why you really came here."

More of the averted eyes. More of the nervous finger twisting.

"Well?" Winters pressed.

Lupe's lips moved stiffly. "The courier, the gringo — he said you had robbed banks."

It became Winters' turn to go speechless.

"And San Sebastian has a bank," he said when at last he'd found his voice.

"Si."

"And money might make up for losing guns."

Lupe's silence was in itself an affirmation.

Winters could only stand thin-lipped and bleak. It went without saying what he should do. This girl was a menace to him, all the way. He had no choice but to turn her in, get out from under. Duty, common sense, experience — they all said so.

Trouble was, he still lay at the mercy of his own impulses. The child's very helplessness, her ineptitude, put brakes on logic. The fact that she had no compunction about involving him, using him, somehow didn't matter.

But that was absurd. It was his own neck at stake. Besides, girl-

child or not, this female had chosen her own road, just as he had, back in the days when ideals had sent him forth to battle Franco. Odds were she'd keep on following it. Even if, this time, he saved her, it would only be postponing the inevitable.

And yet, he couldn't let her go without some effort. The patterns buried deep inside him wouldn't let him.

So...

Moved in the big chair, Lupe moved, ever so slightly... looked sidewise at the door to the patio. It was a calculating thoughtful look.

Winters swore aloud. Crossing to the drawer where he kept his stationery, he took out the stamp pad and a file card. "Here."

Lupe looked up blankly. "*Que quiere?*"

"*Sus huellas*. Your fingerprints. I want them on the card."

"*Porque?*"

"Why? Oh, for the very best of reasons." Winters couldn't help but smile. "You see, my talents include mindreading. Like right now, I know exactly what you're thinking: You figure to stall me till you can get away; and I'm bright enough to know that sooner or later, if you try, you'll make it."

"So when you do, I want your prints for a souvenir. *Gobernacion* will figure out things to do with them, like tying them to your right name and the people you've run with. Given a little luck, it can end

up with your whole group in prison."

Lupe didn't speak, but her eyes did widen. Winters had thought they would. While his gimmick had holes in it, it also held enough truth to start her thinking.

But it was only a temporary stopgap, and he knew it. What he needed was something bigger, something better. Something to fit the situation here in San Sebastian...bring both Lupe and Colonel Vasquez to a halt, yet still save his own neck. He scowled and chewed his lip. Maybe he should just kick Lupe out and let her try to rob the bank herself, if that was what she wanted.

And then, somehow; far back in the nether reaches of his mind, he began to sense the glimmerings of an idea. — ridiculous, of course; but still an idea. One that grew and grew and grew, snowballing, until the sheer effrontery of it took possession of him and he erupted into a wild and perverse gale of laughter.

"So you want a robbery, do you, Lupe?" he choked at last. "Fair enough. I'll give you one. It may do you and me both good — and San Sebastian even more so!"

IT WAS CLOSE to eleven o'clock when Winters once more crossed the plaza, heading for Clock Street, *Calle Reloj*. His route took him past the city hall, the *ayuntamiento*. Colonel Vasquez, ugly and squat and heavy-bodied, stood in

the open doorway, talking with his assistant, young Captain Garza.

As always, Garza nodded, gravely polite. "*Buenos dias, Senor Winters.*" Vasquez, in contrast, merely smirked, blood-shot eyes low-lidded, with an expression so openly contemptuous Winters felt heat rising in his cheeks.

"*Dias, Capitan,*" he acknowledged Garza's greeting, and kept on going. Nor did it help his disposition to hear Vasquez's guttural laugh echoing behind him.

But that was all right, too. If the day after tomorrow saw him laughing last, it would be worth a dollop or two of present irritation.

Across Correo, then. Down Reloj to Nunez and the establishment known to its residents as *El Hoyo*, The Hole — a sort of misbegotten cross between a rooming house and an apartment hotel, if you wanted to be generous about it.

White-haired, cadaverous old *Senor Arreteaga* answered his ring. "*Bueno, senor.*"

"*Bueno.*" Winters nodded. And then, "*Senor, a friend is coming to see me sometime this week. I am expecting other guests. Have you a room free? I want to be sure of space for all.*"

There was indeed a room. On the top floor, the third, and at fifty pesos a night — forty, if *el senor* wanted it for a week or more. Yes, of a certainty, the *senor* could inspect it.

The room was, from Winters' point of view, well-nigh ideal, for its entry was from a flat expanse of roof, overlooking a half-dozen lower buildings.

The last of these was the rambling, two-hundred-year-old remodeled house which included the apartment of Colonel Vasquez.

Winters remembered that apartment well, though he had been in it only once, and that nearly three years ago. But the visit had been of the kind to make the place stick in a man's memory.

Calle Umaran had been under repair at the time — it was during one of the sporadic efforts of a new *presidente municipal* to improve San Sebastian's streets. To the casual glance, the work extended only as far as Zacatecas. It was night, and there were no guards, no barriers. So Winters, who that year still owned a car, had gunned blithely onto what looked like smooth, solid pavement.

But the surface only *looked* solid. The moment the car hit it, stone blocks canted every which way under its weight.

Frantically, Winters braked. But the damage was already done. The cement in which the blocks were set was soft and wet.

Winters swore aloud. This sort of idiocy — it was ridiculous! Why hadn't the stretch been cordoned off or marked?

He found out why a moment later. As if by magic, four San Sebastian policemen rushed from

the surrounding darkness. Accusations, denunciations, flew thick and fast. In minutes, Winters' car was headed down hill towards some vague impoundment-point. He himself, under guard, proceeded to a meeting with the all-powerful *jefe* of police, *El Colonel Vasquez*, in that worthy's apartment.

It was obvious the colonel was expecting company. He sat behind a massive table, his back to a night darkened window. Wooden-faced, greasily polite, he had declaimed at length as to what a heinous offense it was to drive a car onto a freshly-paved street. Expensive, too — by morning, the cement would be dry.

This meant the workmen would have to chip it out with hammer and chisel before the blocks could be reset — a serious delay, with the rainy season so close at hand. The cost might run to five thousand pesos. The barrier stones? If they were not in place, that meant only that someone had moved them.

Was Winters certain he had not done so? Could he produce responsible witnesses to prove it? No? That was strange indeed. Any respectable citizen would have witnesses before he made accusations. But then, just how respectable was Winters?

Respectable citizens did not resist arrest in the manner described by the officers. Which was his choice, of course. The law in its

majesty would deal with him. Naturally, he had the right to a trial before the *presidente*. But that worthy was in Celaya...would not be back until next week.

Meanwhile, in view of the accused's attitude and the seriousness of the offense, it would be necessary to hold him in the jail, the *carcel*. Unless, that is, he would prefer to forego formal trial — settle the matter privately, here and now...

Seething, Winters had settled, to the tune of four thousand pesos, one hundred sixty dollars U.S. At which point Vasquez, smirking openly now, had arisen, crossed to an ancient cube of a safe standing in the corner, and tossed Winters' small wad of bills in on top of a pile of currency big enough to choke a burro. The policemen had escorted Winters back down to the street again, and that had ended the incident.

Ended it, that is, save for the white-hot coal of rage that flared in Winters every time he caught a glimpse of Vasquez.

Nor was he alone; he soon discovered. Apparently the *jefe* was building a private pension fund — holding court privately in his apartment whenever opportunity presented, squeezing pesos from anyone who, falling into his various traps, preferred to pay through the nose rather than rot on the stone floor of the rat-ridden, bug-infested *carcel*.

Now, at long last, a chance to

even the score had come. Though hardly a vengeful man in most circumstances, Winters found the idea inordinately appealing.

"The room, *senor*?" It was *Senor Arreteaga*, at his elbow.

"The room? Oh, yes." Winters roused himself from his reverie. "Yes, it will do nicely. My friend will like the view." Whereupon, paying the old man a week's rent in advance, he pocketed the keys and sallied forth into the town once more.

The rest of the time till lunch found him busier still. First stop was a cordage stall in the open market. He purchased two fifty-foot lengths of half-inch rope, then moved on. By the time he finished, he had acquired a fistful of bubble gum, a rusting tire iron and a roll of adhesive tape.

He was a little surprised when, carrying them all home, he found Lupe still there. It had seemed more likely she would take off in seconds after his own departure, despite the fingerprint gimmick. The fact she hadn't worried him a little. It didn't fit the *guerrillero* pattern. He found himself wondering if there were, perhaps, some additional factor he was overlooking.

But that was a blind alley, a dead end, so he abandoned it and settled down to his usual *pre-comida* bottle of *Negra Modelo*. Lupe had food on the table by the time he finished it — plump chicken *tacos*, *chiles relenos*,

strawberries in cream.

It put Winters in the proper mood for a siesta. But again he had trouble sleeping. Finally, in some irritation, he gave up, told Lupe he was going for a walk, looped his loose-woven shopping bag, his *bolsa*, onto his belt and, stick in hand, struck off up the mountain.

The new bypass road to Guanaquato followed the cleft just beyond the ridge. Hunkering down in the shadow of a boulder, Winters studied it carefully.

An equipment park, gravel dump, oil tanks and tool sheds lay perhaps a half-mile northeast, just to the right of the highway. Well apart from the machines and sheds, on the park's outer perimeter, away from the road and close to the mountain, sat a small, squat, dugout-like structure.

Grunting his satisfaction, Winters settled down to await the end of the working day.

In a rush, at last prime movers, cats and graders pulled into the yard, singly and in convoys. Crews scrambled into trucks and roared away, heading for town or the villages in which they lived. Dusk saw the park silent and deserted, a sprawl of machinery and equipment tracks and dust and shadows.

Coolness came to the area with the setting of the sun. Getting up from behind his boulder, moving unobtrusively along a ledge and then down an *arroyo*, Winters

made his way toward the depot. He came up on it from behind, where foothills of gravel offered concealment, carefully avoiding the watchman who huddled in *sarape* and *sombrero*, dozing cross-legged against a shed.

A heavy padlock secured the lumpy dugout's door. Winters had expected that. He had it open in minutes.

Boxes of dynamite stood neatly stacked against the dugout's rear wall. A case to one side held coils of fuze, boxes of caps, fuse lighters and crimpers.

Starting with a half-dozen sticks of dynamite, Winters gathered up the items he needed and stowed them in his *bolsa*. Then, locking the dugout's door behind him, he headed back up the mountain.

MORNING. Winters wakened with a small tight knot of tension in his stomach.

Because this wasn't just any morning. It was the morning of September 15. Tonight would usher in Mexico's traditional September 16 Independence Day with the unique celebration called *El Grito*.

Here in San Sebastian, at eleven p.m., as in every other city and town in the country, the *presidente municipal* would reenact the famous *Grito de Dolores* — the cry for freedom, the call to arms against the Spanish government issued by the revolutionary priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla,

from the balcony of the *ayuntamiento* at Dolores, Guanajuato, in 1810.

After the *presidente* had recited the famous words, cried out the challenge, would come celebration. Bells would ring — every bell in town. Auto horns would blast. Whistles would blow. Cannons would roar. Men would shout. Women would scream. The great fireworks towers, the *castillos*, would erupt their explosive showers of multicolored fire.

It was as always. The water so murky with dirt no one could possibly see the bottom. As an added bonus, a number of loose bricks fallen from crumbling buildings lay close at hand.

Idly, Winters kicked a few of the bricks together by the *pila*'s base. Then, as if tiring of such, he went back into his own house and settled down with a bottle of *Negra Modelo* to wait for nightfall and *The Grito*.

SAN SEBASTIAN'S streets were already crowded when he wandered down to the plaza a little after nine p.m. It was a nice night, with no trace of rain in the sky. The temperature was just right. Mixed fragrances of *tacos* and wood-smoke, hibiscus and bougainvillea, hung in the air. Grackles squeaked and squeaked and rustled in the trees.

Winters made it his business, for awhile, to drift here and there about the square — chatting with

friends, making small talk with tourists, inspecting the skeletal frameworks that were the *castillos*, pausing to watch incoming truckloads of *rancheros* mill thicker and thicker below the red-white-and-green banners bedecking the *ayuntamiento's* balcony. there was even a moment when, briefly, his eyes met the coldly hostile gaze of Colonel Vasquez.

Winters liked that. It would be good to have the *coronel* recall his presence.

Ten o'clock came and went. Ten-fifteen. Ten-thirty.

Cars clogged the streets now, jammed close to the plaza and abandoned by their owners for the evening's duration. The press of bodies was uncomfortably warm even in the cool night air.

Ten-forty, now.

That was how it had been, in Mexico, for this hundred sixty-eight years. That was how it would be tonight.

Except that this time, Winters thought, he'd add just a little something different.

It was both an exciting and a frightening prospect. Savoring it — both aspects — Winters held himself cordial and relaxed through breakfast. Lupe's questions about his plans he brushed off with jokes and casual chitchat, ending with a command that she go to the market at once, before the *fiesta* crowds moved in and the morning's vegetables were picked over.

As soon as she left, Winters got out pots and buckets. Stripping the dynamite of its wrappers, he set about cooking the nitroglycerine from it.

It was edgy work, dangerous work — the more so, since it was so long since he had last done it. One wrong move and all his troubles would be ended.

But this morning, apparently, an angel was sitting on his shoulder. Neither his hands nor his memory nor his luck failed him. In record time, he had extracted a medicine vial of nitro from the pulpy base and disposed of the residue.

After that, he crimped the detonating cap onto one end of a short fuse, the fuze lighter onto the other, and stowed the unit thus created — plus the bubble gum and the vial of nitro — in a cloth padded paper sack. He put the sack inside a larger one, added ropes, adhesive tape, tire iron, the machine-pistol, a flashlight and a big plastic bag. Then he crammed the sack into the *bolsa*, and dumped a dozen oranges in on top for camouflage.

Next, since Lupe was still gone, he drifted out into the street and down to the *pila*, the public water trough close by his house.

Winters drew in and then exhaled a long deep breath. Sliding around a knot of gabbling *campesinos*, he wormed through the crowd in the direction of *Calle Reloj*.

Minutes later, *El Hoyo's* outer door thudded shut behind him. The hallway was black as a well, with no sign of life. *El Grito* had that effect on people. To a man, the Holo's residents were in the plaza.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Winters ascended to the third floor, crossed the roof to that edge which overlooked Colonel Vasquez's apartment, looped the first of his fifty-foot ropes around two thick stone balusters, swung down it lithely to the adjoining building, then moved swiftly, silently on, roof to roof, to Vasquez's house.

Here a row of built-in cement washtubs marked the area as the maids' *lavanderia*. The stairway door was unlocked. Below, dimly illuminated, by a distant 25-watt bulb, the doorway to Colonel Vasquez's apartment yawned gloomy invitation.

Winters felt a prickle of unease at the back of his neck. Somehow, it all was coming too, too easy.

Stepping out onto the roof again, he crossed to the inner well that was the patio, peered down.

Sure enough, there was Vasquez's window — not that it would do much good. A grill of metal rods set into the stonework effectively barred entrance.

On the other hand, it did offer a chance to look around. Looping his second rope around a pillar, Winters lowered himself the fifteen feet necessary to get a grip

and toehold on the window bars, then played his flashlight about the *sala's* interior.

It was as he remembered, save for one detail: Now, firmly locked in place in a frame atop the heavy table that stood just inside the window, was a sawed-off shotgun, cocked and ready, aimed straight at the corridor door. A stout length of chalkline connected the trigger to the door handle in such a fashion as to fire the gun in the same instant that the door was opened.

The earlier prickle at the nape of Winters' neck mushroomed into a shiver. There was, beyond doubt, some trick by which Vasquez, entering, could disarm the gun trap. But for the unwary, it spelled sure death.

How to circumvent it? Winters debated.

He could, perhaps, fire the gun. But if he did it before *The Grito's* frenzy erupted, there was always the chance someone would hear it — a kind of bad luck he could not afford.

Could he cut the cord? No. The way it was strung and strong as it was, any pressure would surely pull the trigger.

Then what? Winters scowled, groped through his pockets clumsily, one-handed, in search of inspiration.

It came, such as it was, when his probing fingers touched a pencil stub. Tugging the roll of adhesive tape from his *bolsa*, he slapped a

strip across the window pane closest to the shotgun and struck it smartly with the tire iron.

The glass broke with hardly a sound. Reaching through the hole, pencil stub in hand, Winters wriggled and stretched and strained till he could reach the table...the shotgun's butt...the full-cocked hammer.

Another moment, and the pencil stub was wedged between hammer and firing pin.

One shotgun out of action.

Sweating, Winters hauled himself back up the rope to the roof, went down the stairs; braced the tire iron against the lock to Vasquez's door, and heaved.

The bolt snapped with a *ping!* Slipping into the apartment, Winters set to work. It was ten fifty-five now, according to his watch, and the tumult in the plaza was growing ever louder — so loud it seeped through even the thick walls of the house.

Which meant there was no time for dallying.

The safe was as he remembered — an antique, a relic, with such poor closure it would have been no trick to slip a thin sheet of paper between door and casing.

Unwrapping three chunks of bubble gum, Winters chewed them methodically into a wet, sticky mass, stuck it firmly onto the safe's face where it would cover the crack at the edge of the door, shaped it into a crude cup, and poured in the nitroglycerine

from the medicine vial.

The detonating cap came next, taped tight to the safe with its lower end in the cup. The fuze he left dangling.

Finally, he draped the safe with quilts and blankets from Vasquez's bed, propping them in place with the mattress.

Ten fifty-nine now. Again, Winters was sweating. Noise and more noise echoed outside. But still not the crash of bells, the blast of cannon, the explosive screams of the *castillos*.

Then, all at once, a gathering hush.

That would be the fat *presidente municipal* waddling out onto the balcony...unrolling his scroll...readying himself to speak, to echo Hidalgo's immortal words in a new reaffirmation of *El Grito de Dolores*, the cry for freedom.

One minute...two...three...

Sound, then — a blast of sound. The night, exploding.

Winters pulled the fuze lighter's handle and ducked into the bedroom, crouched, his ears palm-covered.

A muffled roar...a rush of flames.

Winters came out of his crouch. Stepping into the living room, he crossed swiftly to the safe and tugged away the blankets.

The strongbox door hung half open. A cascade of currency had spilled out onto the floor.

Winters scooped it into his big plastic bag.

The machine-pistol came next. He left it half enveloped in the blankets, a *guerrillero's* calling card for sure.

He stuffed the sack of money into his *bolsa*, after that, heaped the oranges on top and headed for the corridor door, pausing only long enough to retrieve his pencil-stub from beneath the shotgun's hammer. He lowered the hammer itself, as if the trigger had been pulled.

It would, he thought wryly, give Colonel Vasquez something to brood about — the more so, since the nitro blast had blown out the windows, thus eliminating all evidence of tampering.

Up onto the roof...across to *El Hoyo*...climbing the doubled rope...racing down the stairs into the street...pushing through the milling crowd that thronged the plaza. Familiar faces were everywhere. He made it a point to wave or call to each and every one.

The last of the *castillos* went dark, finally. The crowd began to thin. Winters turned toward home, even going so far as to walk part of the way with *Senor* and *Señora* Ramirez, at whose *tienda* he bought most of his groceries. In the course of the trip, he also managed to dispose of ropes, tire iron, adhesive tape and the rest of the bubble gum.

A right turn then, into his own street, *Callejon del Burrito Loco*, Alley of the Crazy Little Burro, narrow and crooked, rough under

foot, shadowed even at midday. Tonight it was so black Winters had to grope his way.

He moved more slowly now, less steadily, pausing every few steps as if he were tired or drunk. Simultaneously, groping silently in his *bolsa*, he tugged out the plastic bag of cash from Colonel Vasquez's safe and tied its mouth tightly shut.

ANOTHER SEVENTY STEPS. His left hand brushed the stonework of the *pila*, the public water trough. Again he paused, in keeping with his unsteady pattern. The plastic bag was in the mud-clouded water in an instant. Another, and the bricks he had kicked together were atop it, weighing it down, anchoring it safe on the basin's bottom.

That was that. Breathing a small sigh of relief, Winters moved on again, the seventeen steps to his own door. Unlocking it, he stepped inside the patio, shot the bolt behind him and leaned back against the weathered rough-hewn wood. The cords along the back of his neck ached. He felt tired, tired, tired. But at least it was over now. The money was safe. He could relax.

Only then, as he started across the patio, a masculine voice behind him said, "*Momentito, señor! No se mueva!*"

Winters froze. Then — very slowly, very carefully — he turned.

A shadowy figure stood barely visible against the wall behind him. "Into the house!" the voice said with a hand-gesture Winters suspected involved a gun.

He obeyed. His captor followed. He limped a little, Winters noticed.

"The light, Lupe!"

And there was light, and there was Lupe. Blinking against the glare, Winters scrutinized his captor — a boy, really, rather than a man — a pale-faced, darkly handsome boy, black-eyed, intense, thin to the point of gauntness.

A bloody bandage ringed his head. His shirt was grimy, his pants torn, his cheeks stubbled, his hair-line mustache scrubby. The hand that held the machine-pistol — it matched the one Winters had left at Colonel Vasquez's — showed a tendency to unsteadiness.

A pulse of feeling — indescribable, disconcerting — flicked through Winters. Had he been like this, he wondered, those long, long years ago, at Belchite, The Ebro, Madrid?

Now, too, it came clear to him why Lupe had stayed in San Sebastian. This boy, as well as she, had escaped the wreck. But he had been in no shape to travel. So she had come here and played *criada* — maybe even sneaked the boy in too, sometime in the wee small hours. She could have hidden him in the storeroom.

Bank robbery, indeed! Winters had seldom felt so silly.

Except that courage was a quality he could appreciate. And so was loyalty.

"The bag, *senor*; the *bolsa*! The boy commanded.

Wordless, Winters unbuckled his belt, slipped off the bag, and tossed it to the floor. Lupe spilled off the bag, and tossed it to the floor. Lupe spilled oranges from it onto the sinkboard. The flashlight, too.

And that was all.

"Chucho!"

"*You — gringo!*" This from the boy. The pistol's muzzle quivered with his fury. "The money! *Now!* Or you *die!*"

Winters shrugged. "Do I look like an idiot, *cuate*? The kind who'd rob a bank because some stupid girl-child tells him to?" And then, "I spent too many years on the run. I'm not about to take that road again."

"The money, I say!"

"Or you'll kill me?" Winters laughed. "Go ahead. You'll find a corpse has less to say than I do."

That was true, but he hoped Chucho wouldn't test the logic — which he very well might, of course. That was the hazard of dealing with young *macho* types. They lacked judgment.

"There are ways to die, *senor*," Chucho said. "If it takes long enough, you may remember things you never dreamed of."

"True enough," Winters

nodded soberly. "Though I'm hardly worried about how long it will take. Or didn't your red-headed friend tell you about my heart?"

"Your heart?"

"It walks a tightrope, Chucho. Any moment, any extra pressure, and it may fall off. That's why I try to lead a placid life. Like not getting involved in bank robberies."

"You lie!"

"Try me!"

From Lupe: "Chucho! No!"

It hung there, a Mexican stand-off, while the seconds dragged by. Where it might have ended, Winters couldn't guess. One thing was certain! He couldn't let them have the money. Entirely from his own financial troubles, he knew how *Gobernacion* felt about *norte-americanos* who meddled in politics — and aiding and abetting *guerrilleros* was about as meddlesome as you could get.

Then, when it seemed as if the tension in the room must surely splinter into lightning, something hard and heavy crashed against the *puerta de entrada*, the street door. It kept on crashing — harder, heavier.

"*Policia!*" a tight voice belled. "Open up! *De prisa!*"

Alike, Winters and his captors froze.

More pounding.

"*You! Answer them!*" said Chucho. "Do what they want. But remember — we'll be here with

this!" He waved the pistol."

"*Alla voy! Coming!*" Winters yelled loudly. He didn't have to fake the edgy note. Already he was ripping open his shirt, snatching a heavy glass from the sink-board, spilling tequila into it: picture of a man roused from a post-*Grito* drunk.

Chucho stepped back as he started for the door.

Winters hit him on the jaw with the glass.

Down, and out, for Chucho.

"*Lupe! Get him under cover!*" Winters snatched up the machine-pistol and ran towards the *puerta*, pausing barely long enough to toss the weapon into a thick-foliaged planter as he sprinted by.

Only later did it dawn on him that, somehow, a subconscious process of decision had been involved: a decision of whether to give a break to a boy and girl who had only their youth and ardor to commend them, or to save his own neck by turning them in while he had the chance.

The pounding at the door started again. "Damn it, I said I'm coming! *Voy!*" Winters roared, yanking back the bolt.

Young Captain Garza stood in the *callejon*. "*Buena* noches, *Senor Winters*," he said politely. "The noise — *lo siento*, but I thought you might be asleep."

"*De nada, Capitan. No problema*," Winters answered. He stepped back; gestured. "*Pase, por favor.*"

Garza stepped inside. "I am sorry indeed to inconvenience you, *Senor*," he said. "But word has reached me that your *criada* may be involved in the unfortunate affair of the carload of illegal arms we found earlier this week. It is necessary that I interrogate her."

Some of the tension went out of Winters. He had the feeling, abruptly, that this was the beginning of an ever-so-familiar gambit. "Of course, *Capitan*," he nodded. "Unfortunately, the girl hasn't yet come in from the *Grito*. And I do hate to lose a good *criada*. Is there no other way the situation might be handled?"

Garza frowned. "We have known each other a long time, *Senor* Winters. I should like to oblige you. However, illegal traffic in arms is a most serious matter."

"Naturally. I understand," Winters agreed quickly. "But the girl — believe me, if you saw her, you'd know she could only be a pawn."

"Perhaps." Garza sounded ever so sympathetic. "Still, I have my responsibility — to myself, to Mexico, to *Colonel* Vasquez. I have no choice but to search your house."

Bleakly, Winters wondered if Lupe and the boy had had strength and sense enough to make it over the back wall by now.

"There is also another aspect," Garza went on. "A robbery, this very night. The amount stolen was quite substantial. Evidence found

at the scene of the crime indicates the thieves were the same revolutionaries transporting the guns. So at the very least, I must recover the loot."

And there it lay: The issue was money, Vasquez's money. Somehow, the *policia* — Garza, at least — had found out about Lupe. He himself, in trying to play it cute, leaving the machine-pistol at Vasquez's apartment as a red herring, had provided the link to tie the whole thing together.

Next question — what to do about it.

Further, the problem must be faced squarely. There could be no sudden blows this time, no quick saves. Not when dealing with a captain of police.

Yet some sort of deal was clearly possible. The fact that Garza had come alone proved that.

The obvious answer was to play dumb, save his own neck and the money, give Garza Lupe and Chucho, if they were still here. No doubt he could learn to live with it eventually. It was only common sense.

Trouble was, his voice didn't seem to know about common sense. It had, as all too often, developed a will of its own.

"That money bit," he said. "You understand, I don't know, Captain. But Lupe...this afternoon, I saw her out by the *pila*. Let's go take a look. Just give me a minute while I get my flashlight."

A minute's pause, while Win-

tters got the light from the kitchen. Then, in silence, side by side, he and Garza strode out into the *callejon*.

Seventeen steps later, they were at the *pila*, peering about by the light of the flash. Finally, after appropriate dramatic buildup, Winters plunged an arm into the water, groping.

The bricks were there. Unfortunately, they held no plastic bag beneath them.

It was the most desolate of moments. Woodenly, Winters said, "Well, I guess we bombed out this time. You might as well go ahead and search the house."

"*Con su permiso, Senor Winters,*" Garza nodded politely.

They reentered the *casa*...crossed the patio.

And there, by the back wall, in the shadows, lay a machine-pistol and a handful of bills — *mil* notes, *quinientos*, hundreds.

"So," Garza nodded gravely. "Part of the stolen money, beyond a doubt, lost in your girl's haste to get over the wall. A small part, regrettably." He shook his head. "Winters, *mi amigo*, I fear your nature has been imposed upon. It goes without saying that a woman with the audacity to steal such a fortune is no *criada*. I doubt you'll see her again."

And there it was, Winters thought grimly. He was back where he had started financially. Or worse. And even the small glow he felt at the way Lupe and her

partner had played it didn't help much.

He could guess what had happened. The pair hadn't been about to abandon Vasquez's money. So they'd listened in the shadows to his talk with Garza. When he mentioned the *pila*, they had guessed where he had hidden the money. One of them — Lupe, probably — had gone over the roof and grabbed it while he was locating his flashlight.

Then, while he and Garza were out searching the *pila*, the two youngsters had departed, but with a twist. Driven by some shred of loyalty as lunatic as his own, they had left pistol and money in the patio as evidence to clear him of involvement.

Which was great, except that it really didn't touch his problem. He was still broke. He still had no papers.

Desperately, he wondered what to do.

Beside him, Captain Garza was speaking again. "*Senor Winters,*" he said, "tonight you have demonstrated beyond doubt that you are a man of honor. Only one with nothing to hide would have admitted me to his house so freely."

Winters stared, groped for some angle, some explanation.

"Such honesty should be rewarded," Garza continued smoothly. "As you and I both know, however, the ways of bureaucracy are blind. So I shall

take the liberty of subtracting a few pesos from what's here for you."

The wad of bills he held out was more than a few pesos and that by thousands. It was all Winters could do to keep from gaping. A police captain passing out cold cash? It made no sense.

Garza said, "You are a man of many talents, *Senor* Winters. They impress me, for often evidence is concealed in safes and strongboxes. So, it occurs to me that you and I might work together — bending regulations a bit in the interests of justice, as it were.

"I am acquainted with a man in Santa Clara, for example — a most

corrupt official. Who knows what an investigation of his lockbox might reveal? For my part, I feel enough confidence it would prove fruitful that I shall be happy to expedite clearance of your papers in exchange for your cooperation. And if we find proof of this man's corruption in the form of cash — well, again, in my view, you will deserve to be rewarded."

Garza left, finally. Winters prepared for bed.

Another year gone; another *Grito*. And what with this weird twist, he wasn't sure but what he was already headed for more trouble.

But he had a feeling it was going to prove a fine night for sleeping.

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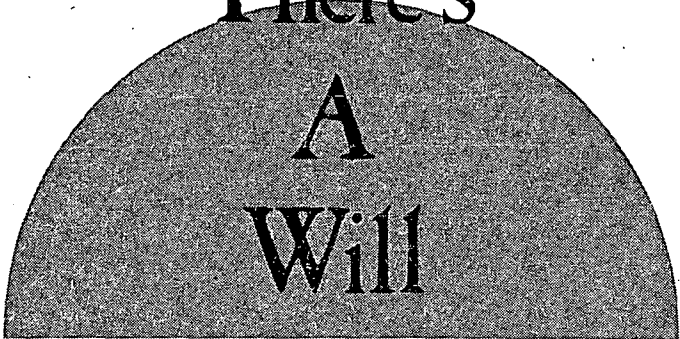
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Where There's A Will



by JAMES McKIMMEY

Susan Adams was willing to murder her brother to get her hands on the money her father left when he died. Unfortunately someone else wanted it even more.

SHE'D GOTTEN ON an afternoon bus in that noxious Port Authority Terminal, in one of the seamiest of Midtown Manhattan, and ridden through the Lincoln Tunnel into New Jersey, hating it. She

hated it because it was a cheap, disgusting way to travel, and because it reminded her of her father's earlier years when he'd been a bus driver on this same route. She had not precisely hated

him, but had always felt a deep dislike for him. He'd been selfish, vain and impossibly stubborn.

Yet it was the only way, if you didn't own an automobile — and she had no use for one, living in New York City — that you could get to the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, where her father now lay dead in a mortuary in the small town where shed'd grown up.

Susan Adams was a small darkly-blond woman of 27 with cold but perfect features and an impeccable way of dressing that entirely complimented her natural sculptured beauty. Right now she was at last seated alone — she'd been unable to get an express bus, but one that kept stopping at small towns, letting out and picking up passengers. She was wearing a yellow turtleneck beneath a light-tan leather jacket, a long caramel skirt and tall, soft, brown-leather boots.

Two men had eagerly seated themselves beside her during the trip, had tried to engage her in conversation. But she'd said not a word to either. Now they were gone, thankfully, and the bus was moving into western New Jersey, finding some scenic October beauty at last, in the rolling foothills there.

It was then that she decided to reread her brother's suicide letter. She put on thin, fabric gloves and removed the folded paper from her purse, remembering so well the

circumstances, two years before when Mark had written that message. Their mother had been the one to die, then. And she'd come home from New York, just as she was doing now.

She'd unpacked in the small family house that Mark had never had the courage to leave. Her father had gone on to the mortuary alone. And then, a half hour before she and Mark were to have left for the funeral, she'd heard him sobbing in a bedroom.

She'd gone in there to find him bent over in a rocker, palms against his face, a small pistol resting on a night table near him, where there was also a note. She'd read the note quickly, understood what he'd intended to do, understood, too, that he had not, finally, owned the courage to complete the task.

So she'd simply picked up the paper, folded it, tucked it under her dress over her bosom, then carefully pulled Mark's hands away from his face and given that face a hard slap, saying, "Enough foolishness, little brother! Let's get to the funeral."

And they'd gone. Mark had not taken his life that day. And she'd kept the note — Mark had been so emotionally distraught that he'd never questioned its disappearance. She'd kept the note, because she had not been certain, then, that he would *not* take his life at some time during that interval — and possibly in some other way

than he'd originally intended. Such as driving their father's car at high speed off one of the higher-altitude roads, in the area.

She knew that Mark had taken out a \$5,000 life-insurance policy, that she was, with her father, one of the beneficiaries. There was double-indemnity on that policy. And a suicide note would nullify all possibility of judging any such manner of death as accidental. But he had not done it.

Two years ago. And she, without real intention, had continued to save the note, having placed it in the bottom of a drawer in her apartment and forgotten about it — until her father had died, until she'd checked on the circumstances of her father's financial situation...and made her current plans.

Poor Mark! she thought, unfolding that suicide message written two years back, now carefully wiped to remove fingerprints. *Poor, neurotic, weak, ineffectual brother Mark!*

He would be in deep grief again, right now, sobbing his little heart out, having lost their precious father this time, probably drinking to ease the pain — he was one step away from being a total alcoholic, she knew. If he only realized that she owned this note, if he only knew what she was planning to do...

She read the message, written in Mark's looping scrawl:



To All Concerned:

I, Mark Adams, am about to end my life. I have long been living in a depressed state. A natural condition for me, I should guess, because I have never, since early childhood, found true cheer in my existence. Now, with the death of a beloved parent, the pain of grief has grown too much to bear. And I shall end that pain by stepping off this mortal coil.

I will find the above act one of supreme reward.

My last, greatest desire--although we have not been overly close these last years--is that my sister, Susan, find a reward equal to that which I am about to realize. That is my fervent desire.

*This, then, is the end. Good-
by, all. Farewell.*

Mark Adams.

They were nearing the blue of the Delaware Water Gap now, at the edge of Pennsylvania, moving into the autumn-colored flare of leaves on the trees — beeches, birches, hemlock, maple, pine — with the colors becoming more vivid as they gained altitude. She returned the letter to her purse, thinking that, yes, indeed, and at last, that fervent wish her brother had indicated in that message of his was going to be granted her, and soon...

She watched the familiar countryside as they rolled closer to her home town, knowing so well those forests they were passing, where deer grazed and ruffed grouse fed along woodland streams stocked with bass and brown trout and carp. She'd been something of a tomboy, in her youth, and always a loner — she'd roamed all of this land on foot, by herself.

She had never forgotten a detail of what she'd observed years before. She had a natural ability to notice even the most ordinary minuscule and a remarkable memory that kept it in absolute retention, no matter how much time went by.

But then her mind was taking her elsewhere, even as they traveled into this county — and it was back to New York, where she lived in a small walk-up in the East

Eighties, working as a free-lance store decorator. And she was remembering when, only two days ago, Mark had telephoned her the news that their father had fallen dead of a heart attack.

That news had not shaken her emotionally. She'd felt no surprise, either — her father had owned a weak heart for a long time.

The only emotion involved was a feeling of anger that her father had, in the past year, become involved with a woman ten years younger than he, someone named, Mark had written, Molly Parks. The woman was, Mark wrote also, and bitterly, nothing but a middle-aged tramp, although their father seemed not to be aware of that fact, or if he were, did not care. It was in the woman's apartment where he'd died. He had moved in with her months ago...

Specifically, Susan's anger was based upon the natural logic that this woman might have guided their father into willing her, instead of his daughter and son, whatever small amount of money he had saved over the years, his property, as well as naming her the beneficiary of his modest insurance policy.

Determined to make that possibility absolute knowledge, and in a hurry, Susan had gone to the lawyer her father had spoken so often of knowing in New York. She'd hoped that aging attorney had been given the responsibility

of her father's affairs, in case of his death, and had written his will. She'd been right.

Sitting down with the old man, she'd swiftly found out that her father had not changed his insurance policy, that she and Mark remained the sole beneficiaries. And she'd also discovered the astonishing news that her father, using a small inheritance of his own, left him two decades ago, had allowed this same attorney to invest it on long-chance mutual funds.

The gamble had paid off. The small inheritance was now worth, Susan learned with disbelief, almost a quarter of a million dollars, converted now into the safety of U.S. Treasury bonds.

Equally important, their father had not lost his head over the woman named Molly Parks enough to have removed Susan and Mark as sharers of that fortune. He simply had added her as a recipient only in the unlikely event that Susan and Mark would not be alive to inherit the money ahead of her.

Well, she and Mark *were* alive, now that their father had passed on. Molly Parks would never see a cent of that money. But neither would Mark, Susan thought, because he was not going to share that quarter of a million with his sister. She intended to have it all. And she was going to get it.

SHE HAD SOMEHOW expected

Mark to be waiting for her at the tiny depot when the bus pulled in. But when she didn't find him there, she reminded herself that he owned no car of his own, that he rode his bicycle to work until winter snows prevented it, then walked.

So she got into a cab driven by a greasy-looking young man who, as the ride began, made the usual efforts to gain her interest and got the usual response of cold disdain. They traveled through the central business district, and Susan saw again the camera shop her brother owned on the main street. There was a *Closed* sign as well as a black wreath on the front door. Passing the store, she felt a faint quickening inside, knowing what she was going to do in a very short time.

Then even that tiny flicker of emotion died as they pulled up finally in front of a small colonial-styled house built at the high point of a rising terrace.

As she paid the driver, she thought about the wealth her father had accumulated. But still, until he'd gone to live with the Parks woman, he had lived here, in this ancient structure, with its two tiny bedrooms. She had shared one of those rooms with Mark until she was 11 and he was 12. Then she had demanded the room for herself, after which Mark, willingly, self-effacing even at that age, had moved to a cot in the basement.

She walked quickly up the stairway to the front porch, carrying her overnight bag, thinking that Mark probably would be watching her arrival from a window. In another moment he would humbly but eagerly open the door for her.

But after she stopped in front of it and pressed the button that rang the chimes inside, the door did not open. She frowned, puzzled, pressed the button again.

Then sudden hope flooded through her. Perhaps Mark had been able to get the job done this time. Perhaps he was in there right now, dead by his own hand, so that she wouldn't have to...

She heard then the drawing of a bolt across metal, then the turning of a key — her father had owned an unreasonable fear of young dope-smoking strangers drifting to this resort town and breaking into his home. So he'd had heavy door locks installed that could be worked only with special keys, as well as inside bolts doubly to guard those doors from being opened.

The door was finally pulled back.

She looked inside at a stranger, a man in his late twenties, sitting in a wheel chair. He was lean, with longish black hair, and wore an old gray sweater. A light red blanket was folded over the lower part of his body. His face was angular, bony — but what dominated were his eyes. They were extraordinarily deep set, as dark

as his hair. He was smiling, but his eyes did not match the smile. They stared at her piercingly and, she decided, feeling immediate trepidation, were touched with madness.

"You're Susan, aren't you?" he said in a gentle but penetrating voice.

"Yes," she said. "But who are you?"

"Richard Bennington," he said easily. "Won't you come in, Susan?"

She hesitated, then moved inside.

The man in the wheel chair reached out and took her suitcase to place it beside his chair. "You're every bit as beautiful as Mark said you were," he said.

She realized that her heart was beating faster than it had been, and she tried to use her voice carefully when she said, "Where is Mark?"

"In Scranton," he said, staring at her steadily — undressing her, she thought, with those dark and deep-set eyes. She was used to that, but not under these circumstances, not by this person, whoever he was.

"But why?" she asked.

"He's buying photographic supplies. One of his major distributors is there."

Impossible! she thought. *Absolutely impossible!* "Today?" she asked. "With Father dead? And to be buried tomorrow..."

"It was something that needed

doing," the man said gently. "I suppose he felt it might keep his mind from this very tragic situation. So he went — to Scranton."

"I can't believe that! He knew I was coming today."

"Of course he did. But you mustn't think him uncaring, Susan. He loves you very much, you know. I think he just felt the grief so deeply that he wanted to do something that would keep him in motion. He'll be back later today. There's really nothing to worry about, Susan, dear. Please sit down, won't you? Those bus trips can be so dreadfully wearing."

Then she watched him moving his chair back to the door. He turned a large key in the lock, then slid the bolt home. The key disappeared under the red blanket covering his lap. He turned the chair around, smiling.

"Sit down, please," he said, softly but in such a way that it became a command.

She sat down on an old sofa.

"Who are you?" she said.

"I told you."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"I'm terribly sorry. I thought probably Mark had written about me, that he'd explained."

"No, he hasn't," she said shortly.

"I'm Mark's friend," the man said. "His very, very close friend."

"Oh!" she said finally. "But Mark hasn't written for some

time, now. He hasn't called either, except when he told me Father was dead. So, no, I didn't know about you."

"I should have explained right from the beginning," he said. "I am sorry, Susan."

"You needn't be," she said crisply. "Do you live here? With Mark? Is that it?"

"That's it," Richard Bennington said. "I have, ever since he was kind enough to invite me. I think the world of Mark, you know. We've gotten to be so very, very close, these past weeks."

She nodded slowly, seeking full implication of what this man was saying. She'd always suspected that Mark was, well...he'd never shown any real interest in girls. Yet the way this man was looking at her, right now, that undressing kind of look... But then there were all kinds, she told herself, people who went every direction.

"You look so...upset, Susan. Please don't be. I'm a cripple as you can easily perceive. But there's no reason to be uncomfortable in the presence of a cripple, is there?"

"It's just that I...don't know you. And here I am with you. And you've locked the door and put the key under the blanket."

"That!" He chuckled. "Habit, I imagine. Something I learned from Mark, who learned it from your late father."

Why did he not produce the key

or offer to unlock the door. "How did you meet Mark?"

"At the camera shop," he said easily. "I've always been interested in photography. I'd come up from Pittsburg — that's how I know about riding buses, you see. There was a stopover here. I was intending to go on to Scranton — where Mark is now — because I'd applied for a job there, in a photography laboratory.

"Well...I was nearly out of money. But I decided to splurge anyway and take a taxi the few blocks necessary for me to get to the local camera shop, to spend my layover time there. Photography becomes a mania to some of us, you see."

She sat there, silent now, waiting for him to go on.

"So I went to Mark's shop and met him. And, well, it was... friendship at first sight, I think you could say."

"I see."

"We just simply hit it off. And the first thing I knew I was confessing all, to Mark. And he, dear heart that he is, told me to forget the job in Scranton, that he needed help in his shop, that I might as well come home with him to live, too. Which is what I've been doing. I really *do* think the world of Mark, Susan. More, really. Are you tired?"

"I'm not tired."

"May I get you something then? I'm really very good at scooting around this house. Something to

eat? Something to drink?"

"No thank you." She was looking at that front door again, wishing she could just get up and open it, and leave — fast. But it was locked. And this absolute stranger had the key.

"You could go view your father's body," the man said softly, "but there's no car, you see. Your father's is still where he'd parked it in the lot of the apartment house where that woman lives. Even if you wanted to call a cab, Mark asked me to be sure and request that you wait until he returned, before you went and looked at the body. He didn't want to do that alone."

Her heart was still beating faster than it should have been. And she was becoming honestly frightened now. But she kept telling herself that she shouldn't be, that there was no real reason. This man was simply someone Mark had met and invited to live and work with him. And there just was no reason to be frightened.

"Perhaps," the man said, "you'd like to look the old place over again? And then rest a little, even if you aren't terribly tired? Mark told me that I was to ask you to use his bedroom." He motioned toward a small hallway.

"He'll be using the cot in the basement. So he's got that room of his all fixed up for you, with fresh linen and everything. Would you like to look around and then retire until Mark gets here? He should

be along any moment now. Is that what you'd like to do, Susan?"

"Yes," she said, and got up.

The man grasped the handle of her suitcase, saying, "I'll put this in the bedroom for you, Susan."

"Thank you very much," she said, then moved away from him.

SHE WENT THROUGH the kitchen quickly, moving on to a small laundry where there were a washer and dryer and one window overlooking the back yard. She saw that Mark's bicycle had been brought in here, a sleek racing model, complete with a complex gear system that allowed ten different speeds, complete with battery-powered lights, front and back, and a speedometer.

On a wall, on pegs, hung her father's shotgun. He had loved to hunt birds with it and belonged to a local club that had built a small clubhouse and a skeet-shooting range on the edge of town.

She went past all of that and slid open the bolt that protected the door which led to the back of the property. She was going through this door. Then she was going to run for it.

She tried the knob. It would not open the door because it had been locked by a key.

"Susan?" said the male voice inside the main part of the house. "Does it all look so very familiar to you? Despite the tragic reason for your being here, isn't it lovely

to be home for a little while again?"

After returning to the living room, where he was waiting, she stated that she did, indeed, wish to retire to the bedroom that had been designated for her. She went there quickly.

With the door closed — one of the few in the house that did *not* have a lock — she hurried to the single window and tried to open it. It would not open. Pressing her face close to the glass, she could see that three large nails had been driven into the wood surrounding the glass at the base of the window, securing it to the frame.

Well, she thought, feeling true agitation, she could smach the glass. But there was a heavy wire screen to get through after that; and undoubtedly the entire screen had been nailed into position, as had been the window itself. If she tried to get through that wire, he would surely hear her, and...

Sh whirled, angered now. *Why? What was going on, here?*

She sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the room petulantly — the same room she had taken for herself years ago. She'd made it entirely hers, adding lacy yellow-and-blue curtains, a flower-patterned bedspread and a fragile writing desk, in addition to a vanity and bureau that were already there when she shared it with Mark. There was also the rocker on which he had con-

templated suicide two years ago. He'd changed absolutely nothing.

Where was Mark? she asked herself. Was he really in Scranton, doing what this stranger in the house had told her he was doing? Or...?

She went to the desk and sat down on the spindle-legged chair that went with it. She opened drawers. She found the diary she knew he kept.

She opened it to scan the entries he'd made in recent weeks, thinking that someone who kept diaries was entirely neurotic. Who were they writing to?

Nevertheless it now had its value, she realized, as she read her brother's written fondness for the stranger named Richard Bennington. Too *much* fondness, she thought.

Or so it seemed, until she read the last of the entries, having followed her brother's change in attitude. In the past two weeks Mark had developed a growing apprehension toward the other man. He could not define it. It was a feeling, mostly. But he was beginning to fear Richard Bennington, sensing somehow that the man was here for evil purposes.

Susan slammed the book shut and returned it to its drawer, damning her brother in her mind for adding to her own apprehension and developing fear. It was enough that she was facing the situation as it was, without read-

ing her brother's weak-spined rambling written in his looping scrawl.

Then she was thinking of his suicide note, written in that same hand, which she'd brought here in her purse. And how she had intended to end his life.

It was to have been quite simple. She had thought that they would have been alone in this house, together. As night descended, she would have started him drinking, if he hadn't already been doing that — surely the easiest of all possible enterprises.

As he drank, she would take care of the refills. As she did that, she would add to them the contents of the prescription bottle, also contained in her purse. Over a period of time, she had collected a healthy supply of sleeping pills and high-strength tranquilizers, prescribed by her physician — but she always hated to take medicines, even to combat her overabundance of nervous energy.

So she owned those pills. Having made her decision about Mark's demise, she had ground them into the condition they now were, in the plastic bottle — powder.

The combination of pills and alcohol would provide the desired overdose. In the morning, she would telephone the police of her discovery of Mark in the living room in his chair with the note be-

side him on an end table, along with an emptied pill bottle. An autopsy would verify that his death was indeed an intended OD. The quarter of a million her father had left would then be hers alone.

But now, with this stranger in the house, with her brother mysteriously gone, those pills, that suicide note in her...

Her purse! She'd left it in the living room!

She hurried back there. Richard Bennington sat in his wheel chair, gazing at her with dark eyes, wearing an expression of wry amusement. "You look so upset, Susan. My goodness. Whatever —"

"My *purse!*" she said. She circled the room. "Did you see it?"

"No." The man spoke calmly. "I don't recall that I did, dear."

She looked at the old sofa where she'd seated herself after arriving. She was *almost* positive she'd placed it there, beside her. She was *almost* certain that she'd carried it, along with her suitcase, when she climbed the steps to this house. But she had *not* taken it into the bedroom. She *did* know that. So...

"I *mustn't* have lost my purse," she stated with intense meaning — and that was absolutely true, since it contained Mark's suicide note, the pulverized pills!

"Perhaps," Richard Bennington said, "you simply left it on the seat of the cab."

"Yes," she said quickly. "I'll phone," she said, moving toward the telephone.

"Let me," he said gently wheeling his chair in front of her, blocking her from going to the instrument. He backed, working wheels with his hands, looking at her again in the lascivious manner he'd demonstrated before.

"I know the number, of course, since I use cabs so often." He dialed, inquired about her purse, waited, then said, "Well, thank you anyway."

He hung up and said to her, "Not there. The dispatcher radioed the cabbie who drove you here. He said you hadn't left it in the cab. Beggars do lie about those things, of course. But — let me dial the bus depot, too."

She watched him, then listened to his questioning about the purse. Again he hung up.

"Bad news all around, I'm afraid. Wasn't turned in there. If you left it on the bus you took from New York, perhaps somebody will turn it in along the line. But knowing the condition of present-day civilization, I imagine you'll never see it again. I *do* hope you weren't carrying a great deal of money in it."

"Not that," she said. "It was that I had some terribly important other things, in it. To me, anyway. I mean just — keepsakes."

"Of course," he said. "A dreadful shame."

There was no real tone of

sympathy in his voice. And his eyes reflected nothing but what she was quite certain was lust. And it was at that point that she *knew* that she had not left the purse on the bus, or in the cab.

She'd left it on that sofa. And she *knew* that he'd taken it, that he'd carried it to the bedroom he used, while she was in Mark's room, and opened it and found what it contained. His eyes, his expression, reflected all of that.

But why had he taken it in the first place, not knowing what it contained? A *fetish*, possibly? Some men had tastes for things like that, she knew. He'd been carrying on an affair with Mark, until Mark had begun to fear him, for some reason.

Now he was looking at *her* with unmistakeable sexual desire. And he'd stolen her purse. What kind of monster was he? Had Mark begun to perceive that he was living with a madman?

"Where's my brother?" she said, realizing that her voice was coming out shrilly.

"I told you, Susan."

"I don't believe you!"

"My *dear*! Why in the world not?"

"Something's happened to him!"

"You're becoming needlessly excited, my dear. But then grief does such terrible things to people. I try to understand that."

"What have you done with my brother!"

"*Susan*," he said, rolling the wheel chair toward her.

She turned swiftly, thinking, *My father's shotgun, hanging on pegs in the laundry room*. She was going to get that, and...

"Where are you going, Susan?" he called as she hurried toward the rear of the house.

She reached the room and removed the gun from the pegs and had it in her hands as he appeared in the doorway between this room and the kitchen.

"Whatever are you *doing*, my dear?"

"I want *out* of here," she said, pointing the gun at him, a slim finger sliding over the trigger, another shifting the safety off.

"You shouldn't do that, Susan — point guns at people?"

"I'm pointing this one — at you."

"You've become distraught, Susan. And there's no reason. The gun isn't loaded. But you still shouldn't point it in that fashion."

"My father always kept it loaded!"

"But your brother didn't care for that, Susan. Break it, if you like. See for yourself."

With strength she didn't know she owned, she broke the old-fashioned gun to see that there were no shells in the two barrels.

"Put it back on the pegs, my dear," he said quietly. "And then come back in here. Let me fix you a drink. All of this — your father dying, Mark being gone when

you'd been expecting him here — it's just been too much for you. Why don't you go back to the living room and sit down and try to relax, and I'll fix you a very nice drink? That should help measurably, shouldn't it?"

She returned the gun to its position on the wall and went past him back through the kitchen to the living room. "I want to see my father's body," she said, hearing him open the refrigerator and slide out a tray of ice cubes.

"I mentioned that Mark did want you to wait for him," he called.

"I'm phoning for a cab. I'm going to the mortuary." She was *not* going to the mortuary, but she was getting out of here, that was certain.

"I can give you money for the cab ride, since you've lost your purse. But Mark will be so upset."

She picked up the phone and put it to her ear, expecting a dial tone, but hearing nothing. Her eyes quickly followed the cord to where it would have been connected to a baseboard. It had been pulled loose, at that point.

He was rolling into the room in his chair, holding a glass. "Susan? This will do you ever so much good. You'll have your bearings back in no time at all. Did you decide not to call for the cab?"

She put the telephone down, blinking rapidly. She took the glass. She was coming apart, she realized. And it was no time to do

that. There was something seriously wrong here. And there was something seriously wrong with this man's mind. And she had to find a way to combat the situation. But she would have to relax a little in order to do that.

So she went back to the sofa and sat down and lifted the glass and drank.

Richard Bennington maneuvered his wheel chair so that he could watch her with those lustful eyes of his. He nodded, saying, "That's the girl — Drink up! You'll feel ever so much better. So calm."

It was bourbon, and strong, and she hated the taste. But she drank again, wanting calmness, and as quickly as she could find it.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asked, as she finished the drink. "*Here,*" — moving toward her — "let me take the glass." He did, and she felt a peculiar numbing sensation. "Oh, I can see how much you're relaxing now." He spoke almost in a whisper.

His whispery voice was very distant to her. She brought her legs up and let the growing numbness of her body weight it to a lying position, on the sofa.

"That's the way, Susan," he said. "Take a little nap. You're such a *gorgeous* girl, my dear, and I did hate to see you so upset. Not such a beautiful creature as you."

Her eyes were closed and she

was drifting away, away...

WHEN SHE AWOKE, she found the room lighted by a single lamp. She looked at her watch, which told her that she'd slept for nearly four hours. She sat up, feeling groggy, and put a hand to her forehead. She looked for him, but he was not in the room.

She stood up, dizziness making her catch an arm of the sofa. Then she was in control. She could not imagine how she'd gone to sleep that way, unless...

But it made no difference now. He was out of the room. If she could get out of here, while he might be asleep...

But she couldn't use the front door, she decided swiftly. The back instead. She could get that gun down again and smash the window — there was no screen on that one — and crawl out before he was alerted to what she was doing, monster that he was.

She hurried through the kitchen again and into the laundry room. She walked toward the gun hanging on the wall, her eyes looking at the objects in that room, including the bicycle. Her look brushed the speedometer and the mileage recorded there.

She stopped suddenly, looking again at the reading of the odometer. She'd examined it only briefly, when she first arrived. Her agile brain, with its uncommon memory, had recorded the numbers she was seeing now. The bike

had been ridden just little over five miles, since she looked at it before.

"Susan?" came his voice from inside the house.

She reached for the gun, thinking that he was in the living room. Crippled as he was, it would take too much time for him to get here, once she had broken the window.

But her arms froze in the act, as her mind told her: *No, he's not crippled. He was the one who'd taken that bicycle out of here and ridden it those five miles. Who else?*

"Susan?" he called again, nearer.

She would not make the try now, she decided suddenly. Later. If he didn't suspect that she'd found out he was no cripple, if she could lull him into relaxing too much, *then* she would make the try.

"Yes?" she said, moving back into the kitchen.

"There you are," he said, in her view now, smiling at her once more. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"I must have," she said. "it lasted four hours."

"What you needed," he said. "You were exhausted."

"I suppose," she said, moving back into the living room, sitting once more on the sofa, as he followed in his chair, "Mark hasn't come home yet, has he?"

It was more statement than question — Mark certainly wasn't in this house anywhere, including the bedroom she'd been using.

Something had happened to Mark. She didn't know what. But his absence was not because he'd gone to Scranton on business — she was certain of that now.

"No," Richard Bennington said. "He hasn't come home. And he won't, you know."

"He won't ever come home here again, Susan."

She blinked in surprise. She felt her entire body as she readied herself to leap up, run, grab the gun in the laundry room, smash that window, get out of here, get away from this maniac.

The man's head wagged. "Never again. Because everything's ready now."

"ready?" she managed.

He laughed softly. "Mark's with Molly Parks. Molly Parks is my stepmother, Susan."

Susan's brain reeled with that information — Molly Parks, the woman with whom their father had been living until his heart attack. She felt a beading of sweat on her forehead.

"You see," the man went on, "Your father told Molly that he'd written her into his will, that she would receive his money, but only if something happened to you and Mark first. And he also told her what he was worth, Susan — over a quarter of a million."

When she learned that, she sent for me. And I came, from Pittsburgh, just like I told you. I

made friends with Mark. We became very close. But that was just while Molly and I were waiting for your father to die. He did, finally. Molly made life a little too — how can I say it? — strenuous, for him. And now everything's fixed."

"How is it fixed?" she whispered.

"Very similarly to the way you planned to do it, Susan. You found out about your father's wealth, too, didn't you, dear? And you were going to murder Mark, weren't you?"

"You stole my purse," she said tonelessly.

"I just wanted it, you know."

She shuddered.

"I took it to my room and was going through it and found the suicide note Mark wrote. Was that after his mother died?"

"Yes."

"I found the prescription bottle, too, and decided what it was. I tested it in that drink I gave you. Mashed pills? Oh, yes. The amount I added to your drink put you to sleep for four hours. The amount you'd have given Mark would have put him to sleep forever. And you'd have had a quarter of a million all to yourself."

"Now, it won't be that way. Just a few more minutes now, and Molly'll be driving your father's car into the alley behind the house. Mark's been drinking, you see. But she's got him sober enough now, so that it'll seem

possible for him to have done what will be done. To you."

She took a breath, staring at him with slitted eyes. "And what is that?"

"You're going to be strangled. We'll do it with Mark's hands. At your father's gun club, where we'll be taking both of you. Then, of course, Mark will be shot in the temple with his pistol. It will appear, of course, that he did it himself. The suicide note..."

Containing that devastating paragraph, she thought — "*My last, greatest desire — although we have not been overly close these last years — is that my sister, Susan, find a reward equal to that which I am about to realize. That is my fervent desire.*"

Mark had not meant her death; she was certain of that — he had long known her savage desire for material wealth. But it would now appear that he wanted her to share his leaving this life, when they found her strangled, apparently by himself, when they found him shot, apparently by his own hand.

And she had brought that note here, she thought frantically. and this monster in the wheel chair now owned it!

"Strange about that note I found in your purse, written by Mark," he said. "It was the same one he wrote yesterday morning, after your father died. I heard him crying in his bedroom. I went in there. And he was bent over, sitting in the rocker with his

hands over his face. That message, written word for word like the one you saved after his mother's death, was on the table beside him, along with his pistol. Strange indeed..."

So, she thought, they'd already had that message, this man and Molly Parks, written a second time by her foolish brother, who again had not had the guts to take his life. And they'd made plans based on that. All they had needed was for her to arrive.

"So, Susan, in about" — the man looked at his watch — "five more minutes, Molly will drive into the alley. Then we'll drive you and Mark to the gun club. Then we'll finish this business."

She watched him with slitted eyes, watched him as he sat motionless in that wheel chair. She told herself — five minutes. She had that, anyway.

Then she made a decision. She'd been *wrong* about the mileage she'd read on the bicycle. She'd simply been upset, groggy from the dope in the drink he'd given her. She had decided, that he'd ridden the bicycle to Molly Parks' apartment, as Susan had slept, to tell the other woman that it was time to put their plan into action — he'd torn out the telephone cord, hadn't he, so that he couldn't have phoned her that message?

But, *no*, she insisted to herself. He'd disconnected the telephone, all right, so that she couldn't

phone out. But he *hadn't* ridden that bicycle earlier. He *was* a cripple, confined to the chair. If she jumped up now, raced as fast as she could to the laundry room, smashed out the window with the shotgun, she could get away from here, before Molly Parks arrived with Mark.

She set herself, then she sprang from the sofa and moved fast, on her way to the kitchen.

"Susan!" she heard.

She crossed the linoleum and was in the laundry room. She grabbed the gun from the wall. She turned, moving toward the window.

Then she heard his voice, not far behind her, saying, "It's no good, Susan. No good."

She held the gun by its barrels and swung the butt into the window, smashing glass. She ran the stock across the bottom to clear remaining shards.

"Susan?" she heard. "I simply wanted Mark's sympathy, you know."

She climbed onto the lower part of the broken-out window, to jump down. But she knew, as she did it, that what he'd just called to her was true.

It was no good.

"Susan?" he called again. and now she heard something other than his voice.

It was the sound of his shoes striking the linoleum of the kitchen as he ran to catch her.

"Susan...?"



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LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Gentlemen:

Do I win a prize for having figured out the mystery of Ernest Savage's tale, "Get Rich Quick" in the March, 1978, issue? If not, I think I deserve one, for it was as big a challenge as any fiction detective ever had.

What I am referring to, if it's an enigma to you, is the puzzle of the typesetting in this story. From pages 119 to 124 the drama of the story is enhanced as one paragraph leaves off in the middle of a sentence, only to recommence a few pages ahead — and often back.

If you take the time to check my 'editing', you will surely see that this was a puzzle as challenging and frustrating as any found in fiction — and I succeeded where I'm sure others failed before me! For this, I eagerly await my prize, for who can tell what suspense lurks in the next issue of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE.

Yours facetiously,
Phyllis Klaiman
1010 Cherrier St., Apt. 1201
Montreal, Quebec
H2L 1H8
March 29, 1978

P.S.:

Perhaps you can help solve another mystery as well. I have checked every dictionary I own — British, American and French — and could not find the meaning of the word "segue", found on page 120 of the aforementioned story. Do you have any clues?

Dear Phyllis Klaiman:

Alas, the only prizes you win for your brilliant deduction are our congratulations for an ultra-astute bit of literary sleuthing, plus this appearance in print. To you and to the rest of our readers, MSMM expresses its sincere apology for this inexplicable foul-up. Ye Eddes are still scratching their scalps over just how it ever happened.

As for segue (pronounced seh-guay), it is an old movie-making term which means an elision, a slipping from one sequence into another.

Apologies again, to you and all, and to you thanks for pointing out our colossal boo-boo so amusingly.

THE EDITORS

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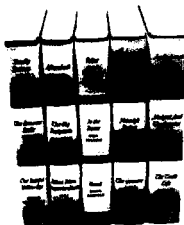
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